

**Paul's Epistles to the Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon**  
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All scripture taken from the New International Version (NIV, 2011)

**Lesson 1**  
**Introduction and Background**  
**Philippians 1:12–26**  
**Colossians 1:24–2:5**  
**Philemon 1**

**Introduction**

**Question:** What is an epistle?

Over the next eight weeks, we'll be studying three of Paul's epistles: Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. What is an epistle? It is, simply, a letter (the word "epistle" originates from the Greek *epistolē*, meaning a message or letter).

Ancient letters, including the epistles in the Bible—not just those by Paul—share a general form comprised of five parts. Being able to identify these parts can make the text more accessible and perhaps help us to interpret the content more accurately.

**1. Salutation.** This is simple to understand. Much in the way we might begin a letter by writing our name and address at the top of the page and then starting with "Dear Arden," the salutation includes the identity of the sender, the recipient, and a brief greeting.

Example: "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to God's holy people in Colossae, the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ: Grace and peace to you from God our Father" (Colossians 1:1–2).

**2. Thanksgiving and Prayer.** This is also rather self-explanatory—and reasonably self-evident in Paul's writing.

Example: “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God’s people...” (Colossians 1:3–4, continuing through vs. 14).

Paul includes this prayer and thanksgiving in all his letters except in Galatians, where its absence is glaring, reflecting his anger that they have compromised the gospel.

**3. Body.** This tends to be the longest section of the letter, and the one we read most frequently. This is where the writer delivers his message—where Paul does his teaching—and where we most often derive doctrine.

Example: “The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him...” Colossians 1:15–16.

**4. Exhortation and Instruction.** Having concluded his lesson, Paul makes some remarks on what his audience’s response should be. This often includes advice for Christian living and specific things to pray for.

Example: “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (Colossians 4:2–6).

**5. Conclusion.** Here, Paul steps back to make some more personal remarks. These can include greetings, news, a benediction, or a personal wish.

Example: “Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts...” (Colossians 4:7–8, continuing through vs. 18).

So what does this mean for us as we read and attempt to learn meaningful things from other people’s 2,000-year-old mail?

**Question:** Does (or should) the form of a book of the Bible affect how we interpret it? How? How might we approach an epistle differently from how we would approach a narrative passage such as Joshua or one of the Gospels?

## **Background**

It is vital to remember that Paul was (usually) writing to audiences that he already knew to some degree. His teaching is not given in a vacuum. He is not writing theological treatises for the general public.

Take the book of Philippians as an example. Paul has been to Philippi; in fact, he founded the church there (Acts 16). These are longtime friends he is writing to. In his epistle to the Philippians, Paul is building on a pre-existing relationship. In a sense, we are joining an ongoing dialogue in progress—one conducted in a different language, culture, and era from what we know—and there is much of this dialogue that we obviously don't have. It can be helpful to remember this if we ever have trouble following Paul's flow of thought.

In each of his epistles, Paul is writing to a specific audience with a specific purpose in mind. Thus, it is important to try to understand what we read in light of Paul's intended meaning for his original audience. Rather than asking primarily "What is this text saying to me?", we do better to first ask, "What was Paul saying to his original audience?" and "How would they have understood it?" This will keep us from wandering too far afield.

We will look at the background of each of these recipients—Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon—as we study these epistles individually. But for now, let's focus on the common factor, Paul.

## **Background: Paul**

Many in the church have a respectable understanding of at least the broad strokes of Paul's life. But as with any of the Bible stories we've been saturated with since childhood, we run the risk of missing how remarkable the story really is when we're so familiar with it. A bit of review might help us to a better appreciation of just where Paul is coming from in his epistles.

Paul was a Greek-speaking, Jewish Roman citizen from Tarsus, a city in modern-day Turkey. He was a tentmaker by trade (Acts 18:3) and a Pharisee—a member of a religious group devoted to tradition and strict observance of the law.

He first appears in the Bible in Acts 8:1, where he is “giving approval” to the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Most likely because he views them as heretics, he becomes a vicious persecutor of Jewish Christians (Acts 8:3).

On his way to Damascus, Paul is blinded by a vision of Jesus. This experience convinces him that Jesus is the Messiah: he immediately converts to Christianity and begins to preach Jesus as the Son of God (Acts 9) in Damascus and Arabia. Some three years later (Galatians 1:18), Paul travels to Jerusalem, where he becomes connected with Peter and the leaders of the church.

Paul undertakes his famous missionary journeys, becoming the foremost Christian missionary to the Gentiles. Over the next two decades or so, he establishes numerous churches in Asia Minor and Mediterranean Europe (Acts 13–20).

Paul returns a final time to Jerusalem, where he is arrested (Acts 21). After a great deal of legal wrangling with the Jewish and Roman authorities (Acts 22–26), Paul appeals to Caesar and is sent to Rome, where he is placed under house arrest (Acts 27–28). According to popular Christian tradition, Paul dies in Rome, possibly after the Great Fire of Rome (64 A.D.) under the reign of Nero.

In short, Paul spends decades traveling by foot and by ship to preach the Gospel in a hostile world in which the sort of “troublemaking” he was doing was readily punished with beatings and imprisonment.

If you have any trouble at all envisioning what that sort of life would be like, let Paul explain it himself:

**Read: 2 Corinthians 11:21–29**

<sup>21</sup> Whatever anyone else dares to boast about—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast about. <sup>22</sup> Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham’s descendants? So am I. <sup>23</sup> Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again.<sup>24</sup> Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. <sup>25</sup> Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, <sup>26</sup> I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in

danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. <sup>27</sup> I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. <sup>28</sup> Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. <sup>29</sup> Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

**Question:** What is Paul saying about himself?

Paul is the greatest: no one has better credentials, no one has suffered more for the gospel, and no one has accomplished more for the gospel among the Gentiles. Yet he is not lording this over his audience, his fellow Christians, converts he himself made. To the contrary, he is happy (as it were) to have suffered for them and for the gospel.

### **Authorship**

All three of the books that we're going to study—Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon—were probably written in 60–62 AD, while Paul was imprisoned in Rome. Note what he says in his introductions to these letters.

**Philippians 1:12–14:** “Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.”

**Colossians 1:24:** “Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.”

**Philemon 1:** “Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus...”

Paul has experienced countless hardships and has spent years in prison, and yet his attitude in writing each of these letters is extremely positive, as though he were perfectly content to be exactly where he was—because he is doing precisely what God has called him to do.

## Discussion

**Question:** What is the value of being aware of Paul's life and circumstances in reading his letters?

-More broadly, what is the benefit of understanding the form and context of a particular book of Scripture?

-What danger is there in not having this understanding?

**Question:** Paul says that he rejoices in what he is suffering (Colossians 1:24) for the sake of the gospel and the church.

-Why does he rejoice in this way?

-What is the value, the purpose, of rejoicing in suffering for the sake of the gospel?

-What would it take for us to be able to rejoice in suffering for the Lord?

**Lesson 2**  
**Imitators of Christ**  
**Philippians 1:27–2:18**

**Philippians: Background**

Philippi is a coastal city located in modern-day northern Greece. In ancient times, it was located on the Via Egnatia, an important thoroughfare connecting the western coast of Greece to Byzantium (modern-day Istanbul in northwest Turkey).

The church at Philippi was founded by Paul, Silas, and Timothy nearly 15 years prior to the writing of this letter. Paul has a long and fond relationship with this church.

At the time of this epistle's writing, the church at Philippi is experiencing persecution. Philippi was a Roman military colony: its territory had been divided and given to Roman settlers, many if not most of whom would have been veterans of the Roman army. In Rome, the emperor was considered divine—and because he had favored them with this city, it is likely that the residents of Philippi would have been extremely dedicated to him. It is easy to imagine how a fledgling church of mostly Gentiles would have come into conflict with a populace devoted to a different lord and savior.

In this setting, Paul (along with Timothy) is writing to encourage and to express solidarity with the Philippians:

**Read: Philippians 1:27–30**

<sup>27</sup> Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel <sup>28</sup> without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God. <sup>29</sup> For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, <sup>30</sup> since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

**Question:** What is Paul's message to the Philippians?

Paul is writing to encourage the believers of Philippi to be united in the faith, just as he presents himself as in union with them—Paul and the Philippians are “going through the same struggle.”

**Read: Philippians 2:1–4**

<sup>1</sup> Therefore, if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, <sup>2</sup> then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, <sup>4</sup> not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

**Question:** What qualities, according to Paul, mark unity with Christ?

Paul cites unity in love, spirit, and mind. But his primary emphasis here is on humility: putting the needs of others in the church above personal interests. Not content to leave it at this, Paul gives an example of exactly what this should look like:

**Read: Philippians 2:5–11**

<sup>5</sup> In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

<sup>6</sup> Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

<sup>7</sup> rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

<sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

<sup>9</sup> Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,

<sup>10</sup> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

<sup>11</sup> and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

**Question:** What is the mindset of Christ?

The central mindset of Christ as presented by Paul here is one of humility. Christ does not use his equality for his own advantage. He makes himself “nothing,” an ordinary human being. He humbles himself to obey the will of God—which includes an ignominious and terrible death on the cross.

Why? Why does Christ humble himself in this way? He does it for us, of course—to deal with the penalty of our sin, to deliver us from the captivity of sin and death, to make eternal life possible for those who believe.

**Read: Philippians 2:12–18**

<sup>12</sup> Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,<sup>13</sup> for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose. <sup>14</sup> Do everything without grumbling or arguing, <sup>15</sup> so that you may become blameless and pure, “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.” Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky <sup>16</sup> as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain. <sup>17</sup> But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. <sup>18</sup> So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.

Paul tells the Philippians to “do everything without grumbling or arguing,” to “become blameless and pure,” and to “hold firmly to the word of life” (2:14-16)—this is what children of God look like. He also tells them to “work out [their] salvation with fear and trembling” (2:13); this verse has been the subject of some debate over the years.

**Question:** What does it mean to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling”?

First, it should be noted that this working out of our salvation is a *response* to what God has already done and is presently doing (2:13). Paul says as much in verse 12: “Therefore...”, that is, *because Christ humbled himself, died, rose, and was exalted*, we are to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. It is God who saves us, through no merit or work of our own, yet God gives us certain commands, requiring us to be active participants in his work: “Whoever wants to

be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24).

To better understand what Paul means by “working out” salvation, it may be helpful to consider what he says regarding his working out of his own salvation, from Philippians 3:

**Read: Philippians 3:12–14**

<sup>12</sup>Not that I have already... arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. <sup>13</sup>Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, <sup>14</sup>I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

This is a view of salvation not as something that happens in a moment, at conversion, but as an ongoing process (see, for example, 1 Corinthians 1:18, “...to us who are being saved...”; for similar wording refer also to the book of Hebrews). This salvation will finally be fully accomplished on the day we are resurrected and glorified with Christ.

What about the “fear and trembling” part? John Wesley observes that this is a proverbial expression. He writes, “These strong expressions of the Apostle clearly imply two things: First, that everything be done with the utmost earnestness of spirit, and with all care and caution: (Perhaps more directly referring to the former word, *meta phobou*, *with fear*) Secondly, that it be done with the utmost diligence, speed, punctuality, and exactness; not improbably referring to the latter word, *meta tromou*, *with trembling*.” [Sermon 85, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-85-on-working-out-our-own-salvation/>]

Put another way, we understand the fear of the Lord not in the sense of feeling danger or a threat but in the sense of reverence and respect. This is how we are to respond to the work of God in our lives. But this is not all obligatory toil. There is a benefit to us: we will become “blameless and pure,” shining “like stars in the sky” (2:15).

## Discussion

**Question:** Paul instructs the Philippians to work out their salvation with fear and trembling. What does working out our salvation look like in practical terms?

**Question:** In twenty-first century American Christendom, we don't have anywhere near the degree of community that the first-century church had, and we have quite a bit more structure and scheduling. Our church is large; it is relatively easier to avoid bickering with other members simply because it is easier to avoid those people. So we may not have conflicts with one another in the church. We may not have "selfish ambition" or "vain conceit" to any glaring degree. Yet we, like the Philippians, are by nature self-centered. We tend not to, as Paul says, value others above ourselves, not looking to our own interests but to the interests of others. But Christ is our example of humility just as he was theirs.

-To what extent should we as Christians place the interests of others in the body of Christ above our own?

In a big church with many rooms and many Sunday school classes, it's easy to avoid the sorts of interpersonal conflicts that could have afflicted a small church like the one in Philippi, which would have met as a single group on a much more intimate scale. And if one of them became truly offended, that person couldn't just leave and go to another church, as some of us might—that was the only church in the city. But just because it's easy for us to avoid direct conflict doesn't mean that we don't have conflicts within the church.

-What sorts of conflicts do we see arise within our church today?

-How should we handle these conflicts?

**Question:** What are some things in and around the church, small or large, about which we like to have our own way?

It seems as though if any church in any denomination wants to change its service times or Sunday school times, people get upset. It's an inconvenience. When people don't like the music played in service, they complain. Their personal preferences aren't being met.

If we can stop being completely self-centered for a moment, we may realize that such changes are not being made to inconvenience us. They are being made

because the church believes that they will better meet the needs of the community of faith and best accomplish the work of the church.

-What are some ways in which we can be better about being mindful of the needs of others?

-How can we be peacemakers?

-How can we contribute to the unity of the body of Christ?

**Lesson 3**  
**Confidence in the Flesh and Paul's Example**  
**Philippians 3**

**Previously**

From prison in Rome, Paul is writing to the church at Philippi, which he founded along with Silas and Timothy about 15 years prior. The church is experiencing persecution for its faith; Paul is writing to encourage the believers there.

In Philippians 2, Paul encourages the believers to be united in the faith and to be humble, putting the needs of others in the church above their own personal needs. He presents Christ as an example: Christ humbled himself, became a man, and suffered death. Because of this obedience, God “exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name” (2:9).

Paul goes on to encourage the Philippians to work out their salvation with fear and trembling, to become blameless and pure, and to hold firmly to the word of life.

What does all of this mean? In Philippians 3, Paul discusses the God-focused life, using himself as an example. Once again, his joy in his circumstances is evident.

**Read: Philippians 3:1–9**

<sup>1</sup> Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you.

<sup>2</sup> Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh.

<sup>3</sup> For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh—

<sup>4</sup> though I myself have reasons for such confidence.

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup> circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup> as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

<sup>7</sup> But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. <sup>8</sup> What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

**Question:** What point is Paul making here?

In Philippians 2, Paul holds up Christ as the perfect example of humility, saying that Christ, who was “in very nature God,” “did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage” and “he made himself nothing” (2:6–7). Now he makes another point along similar lines, using himself as an example.

Paul is, as he says here (much as he does in 2 Corinthians 11), the greatest. He’s not lording it over anybody here; he’s just presenting it as a fact. He’s just the best. No Jew could have had a better pedigree. No Pharisee (and Paul was of course a Pharisee) could have kept the law more diligently. No defender of the Jewish faith could have persecuted a “heretical” sect—the Christian church—more zealously. In short, no one could have a better résumé of Jewish faith.

And now he says, “But whatever were gains to me...”—and these were certainly gains to him in his former, pre-Damascus-Road life—“...I now consider loss for the sake of Christ...I consider them garbage.”

**Question:** It is reasonably easy to understand that Paul would want to put his past, pre-conversion life behind him for Christ. But why does he call his past accomplishments “a loss” and “garbage”?

Note the distinction Paul is making in verses 2 and 3: between those who circumcise themselves outwardly and thus put confidence in the flesh to be considered righteous by God and those who have put their faith in Christ, who are in fact the true circumcision.

Circumcision was one of the major theological questions the first-century church faced. That is, should the Gentiles (i.e., non-Jews) who came to believe in Christ be made to undergo circumcision and follow the law of Moses? As Acts 15 relates, the matter required a major assembly of all the apostles and elders to sort out. This is also a central point of contention in Paul’s epistle to the Galatians

(see especially Galatians 2:11–21). In both cases, Paul’s answer is an emphatic “No.”

**Question:** Why is Paul, a good Jew by any measure, so vehemently opposed to the circumcision of Gentile converts?

Verse 9 is the key. Paul is not seeking “a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.”

Circumcision was a mandatory part of keeping the covenant between God and the Jewish people. But now, Christ has come, and the righteousness of the Christian is *his* righteousness, imputed to the believer through faith. No outward act, no physical work could earn it.

This is what Paul is getting at. No religious person could have more confidence in himself, in his own achievements, in his own credentials, in his own godly works than Paul. But it doesn’t matter. None of that matters anymore because real righteousness can only come from God on the basis of faith. Clinging to his own achievements would only hold Paul back from grasping hold of Christ’s achievements.

All of this for “the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus” (3:8). Paul has mentioned what that worth is—righteousness from God through faith—and now he goes on to explain the benefits of this righteousness.

**Read: Philippians 3:10–21**

<sup>10</sup> I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup> and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. <sup>12</sup> Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. <sup>13</sup> Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, <sup>14</sup> I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

<sup>15</sup> All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you.

<sup>16</sup> Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

<sup>17</sup> Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do.

<sup>18</sup> For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. <sup>19</sup> Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. <sup>20</sup> But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>21</sup> who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

**Question:** What does Paul want?

-Why does he want to know Christ?

Here is the great benefit of knowing Christ. Here is the great payoff of considering every bit of personal greatness “garbage”: to know the power of Christ’s resurrection (3:10). This is the great hope of the gospel: “somehow, [to attain] to the resurrection from the dead”; for Christ to “transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (3:11, 21).

This is an understanding of salvation as a process that will not be completed until the day when we are resurrected from the dead and given glorified, eternal bodies. Paul says that he does not consider himself to have yet taken hold of it; thus, he presses on toward the goal (3:13–14).

Paul closes this section with another comparison, this time between the Christian life and the life of unbelievers. Paul has harsh words for those he describes as “enemies of the cross” (3:18). The believer focuses on the things of God, but these unbelievers set their minds on earthly things (3:19). They do not serve or work to please God, but themselves. Thus, Paul says, “their destiny is destruction” (3:19).

In contrast, Christians are to follow Paul’s example: to forget what is behind and to press on to win the prize for which God has called them (3:13–14). Their citizenship is in heaven, and Christ will glorify them when he comes (3:20–21).

**Question:** What makes someone an enemy of the cross of Christ? Is this different or the same as simply being an unbeliever?

## Discussion

**Question:** At the time of this writing, Paul had already come to faith, had a visual encounter with the risen Jesus, and spent decades in the service of the Gospel. So what does he mean when he says he wants to know Christ (3:10)?

**Question:** Paul's desire to know Christ is earnest and fervent.

-Is our desire to know Christ this strong?

-What are reasons why it may be weaker?

**Question:** We would probably all say that we want, like Paul, to know the power of [Christ's] resurrection (3:10). But this statement is incomplete; the full statement is, "to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death."

-What does it mean to participate in Christ's sufferings and to become like him in his death?

-What would that look like in our lives?

**Lesson 4**  
**Joy, Peace, and Contentment**  
**Philippians 4**

**Previously**

Paul is writing from prison in Rome to the church at Philippi, which he founded along with Silas and Timothy some 15 years prior, to encourage the believers in the face of the persecution they are experiencing.

In Philippians 2, Paul encourages the believers to be united in the faith and to be humble, putting the needs of others in the church above their own personal needs, presenting Christ as an example.

In Philippians 3, now using himself as an example, Paul discusses why the Christian should have no confidence in the flesh, but should strive to know Christ and thus to obtain the righteousness that comes from God through faith.

Throughout this epistle, Paul's joy in the midst of his difficult circumstances is evident. In Philippians 4, he speaks further about this joy as he encourages the persecuted church.

**Read: Philippians 4:4–7**

<sup>4</sup> Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! <sup>5</sup> Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup> Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

The Philippians are experiencing some hardship. They live in a Roman city full of pagans who have their own religious tradition and who regard the emperor as divine. The Christians are being persecuted for their faith in Christ.

Whether in terms of persecution or in terms of the many other ways in which life can be unpleasant and punishing, whenever things are going badly, it is typical to worry, to be anxious. We all do it—it comes so naturally. And yet Paul is saying, “Don’t! Don’t worry! Don’t worry about *anything!*” (and to this we might respond with, “Well, Paul, that’s easy for you to say”).

**Question:** *Why* should we not be anxious?

Throughout this epistle, Paul has been attempting to draw the Philippians' focus away from themselves and to Christ. "The Lord is near," Paul says. The Lord is near—therefore do not be anxious. Paul is not giving them advice on how to de-stress, or how to remove stressors from their lives, or how to improve their work–life balance. He is telling them to focus their attention on the Lord.

What does a person whose focus is on the Lord do? For one thing, such a person presents his requests to God. That's a basic level of God-focus. How does he present his requests? Out of fear? Out of desperation? No—with thanksgiving.

**Question:** What thanksgiving is Paul talking about? That is, what should believers be thankful for when they are praying out of their need?

God loves us. God has our good in mind. Through the work of Christ, God has already accomplished everything needed for our righteousness and salvation. God is with us. These are all things that Christians can and should be mindful of at all times—and should be thankful for at all times.

This focus on God rather than on ourselves has another benefit, Paul says: the peace of God, which we can only properly receive when our minds are properly oriented toward God rather than toward ourselves or our problems.

**Question:** What is the benefit of the peace of God? What does it mean to have your heart and mind guarded in Christ Jesus? What are they being guarded against?

The peace of God is the antithesis of human anxiety. This peace guards against this anxiety, against fear. And it is only through this orientation toward God and faith in Christ Jesus that we can obtain this peace.

**Read: Philippians 4:8–9**

<sup>8</sup> Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. <sup>9</sup> Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

If not being anxious in the face of trouble seems difficult, Paul goes all the way down the field in a way that seems almost absurd. “Rejoice in the Lord always” (4:4), he’s already said. Now he’s telling the Philippians to think about all that is good—this goes well beyond simply not being anxious.

“Imitate me in this regard,” Paul says. And who better to imitate? Paul has suffered more than anyone for the sake of spreading the Gospel, and yet his joyful enthusiasm permeates this entire letter. How could this be even remotely possible—unless the God of peace was with you? Unless your heart and mind were being guarded in Christ Jesus? Being in tune with God, trusting in his concern for our lives and circumstances from his eternal outlook, is the key to the joyful, positive mindset Paul speaks of here.

**Read: Philippians 4:10–13**

<sup>10</sup> I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. <sup>11</sup> I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. <sup>12</sup> I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. <sup>13</sup> I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

“The secret of being content”—this is what enables Paul to rejoice in all circumstances, to think about the things that are true and noble and right.

**Question:** What is the “secret of being content in any and every situation?”

Philippians 4:13 is an extremely popular verse, and like any beloved verse, it is sometimes applied out of context and in ways not included in Paul’s meaning here.

**Question:** What does Paul mean when he says, “I can do all this through him who gives me strength”?

The context is the clue, and the translation reading “I can do all this...” rather than the more well-known “I can do all things...” helps, because it begs the question, “*this* what?”

Some people have taken Philippians 4:13 to mean that God will help them fulfill any desire they have, reach any goal they set, achieve anything they put their mind to. But this is not what Paul is saying.

The “*this*” is that Paul has learned to be content in all circumstances (4:11). Paul has been talking about the peace of God (4:7)—he still is. Whether he is in need or has plenty, whether he is well fed or hungry, he is content. Why? Because he has a lot of experience suffering and being imprisoned? Because he has an iron will and tremendous self-discipline? No. It is because God is giving him the peace and the strength to endure in all circumstances.

This verse is not the foundation for an “achieve all your dreams” motivational speech. It is more necessary. In all of life’s circumstances, Paul is saying, even and especially in the *worst* circumstances—pain, weakness, need, suffering—God is there with him, giving him not only the strength to survive and endure but also this contentment, this freedom of spirit that can only come through the empowerment of God.

**Read: Philippians 4:14–19**

<sup>14</sup> Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. <sup>15</sup> Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; <sup>16</sup> for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need. <sup>17</sup> Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account. <sup>18</sup> I have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. <sup>19</sup> And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.

Paul is wrapping up his letter by turning his attention to his friendship with the Philippian church. The Philippians have sent Paul gifts (4:18), and not for the first time—this is why Paul was discussing need and contentment in the previous verses. Paul is now “amply supplied.” And yet he seems happier at the fact that they gave than at the fact that he was the recipient. “Not that I desire your gifts...” he says. Paul is happy because the Philippians are pleasing *God*.

Verse 19 is a popular one, for obvious reasons. But like any verse in the Bible, it cannot be plucked from its context and applied in any manner desired. Paul calls

the Philippians' gifts "a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God" (4:18). Paul has chosen this strong Old Testament imagery to describe the gifts. Verses 17–19 comprise a complete idea. "What I desire is that more be credited to your account," Paul says. That is, because the Philippians have sent such God-pleasing gifts, as far as Paul is concerned, their account is credited. And who will repay them? Certainly not Paul—he's stuck in prison in Rome. The Philippians have generously met Paul's needs, those of a minister of the gospel, according to their own riches, and because of this, God will treat them in kind according to "the riches of his glory."

## Discussion

**Question:** "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (4:8). Paul is not speaking merely of doing this for a moment here or there, but of a continual mindset. Most of us would admit based on personal experience that this is much easier said than done.

-How do we do it?

-What is the benefit of doing it?

**Question:** Paul, who has suffered for the Gospel and is in prison at the time of this writing, talks about having learned to be content in all circumstances (4:11–12).

-In practical terms, what does being content in all circumstances look like?

-How can we be content in all circumstances?

**Question:** Paul tells the Philippians to "rejoice in the Lord always" (4:4).

-What does it mean to rejoice in the Lord?

-What is the value to us of rejoicing in the Lord?

**Lesson 5**  
**The Supremacy of Christ**  
**Colossians 1–2:5**

**Colossians: Background**

Colossae was a city in what is now southwest Turkey. The church there would have been comprised of mostly Gentile believers. Paul did not found the church at Colossae; in fact, it seems he has never been there (Colossians 2:1). But he has received news from one of his co-evangelists, Epaphras (1:7), and is writing in response.

It appears that most of the news Paul has received has been good: he writes to them, “We have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God’s people—the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel that has come to you” (1:4–5).

Paul’s emphases in this epistle are the false teachings the Colossians are being exposed to (which he addresses both directly and indirectly) and, in natural relation, the supremacy of Christ.

Paul begins by giving thanks for the Colossians and then reminds them that God “has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (1:13–14).

This leads into Paul’s first talking point.

**Read: Colossians 1:15–23**

<sup>15</sup> The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. <sup>16</sup> For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup> He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup> And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the

supremacy. <sup>19</sup> For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, <sup>20</sup> and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

<sup>21</sup> Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. <sup>22</sup> But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation— <sup>23</sup> if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

**Question:** What point is Paul making about Christ?

First, Christ is supreme over all creation: he is the creator of all things, he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. Creation is not only completely subject to him but completely reliant on him for its very existence.

Second, Christ is supreme as redeemer. He is the head of the church and the firstborn from the dead “so that in everything he might have the supremacy” (1:18). Through the cross, through the blood of Christ, God has enabled all things to be reconciled to himself. His work as redeemer is complete and thorough and all-sufficient.

**Question:** What is Paul's concern for the Colossians?

Paul says all of this about Christ with the point of encouraging the Colossians to continue in their faith (1:23)—that is, to hold fast to Christ. If they do, he says, God will “present [them] holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation” (1:22).

Why is Paul talking about this? The church at Colossae has been exposed to false teaching. Paul's concerns and arguments suggest that this heresy is some form of Gnosticism. Gnosticism (from the Greek word *gnosis*, “knowledge”) was a religious philosophy that took various forms and which became intermingled with various religions, including first-century Christianity.

Gnosticism viewed the spiritual as fundamentally good but matter—the physical—as fundamentally evil. Such a view obviously makes it impossible to accept the incarnation—that God would actually become a physical man. By this

view, Jesus would have had to either not been truly a man or not truly God. For the Gnostics, salvation was a matter of some secret knowledge revealed by Christ and had nothing to do with the cross.

Paul rebuts every bit of this heresy when he says, “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (1:19–20). Regarding challenges to the true humanity of Christ, Paul says that God has reconciled them “by Christ’s physical body through death” (1:22).

Furthermore, the nature of the deity of Christ was a point of contention for many people in early Christianity, with a number of heresies assigning limited or inferior divinity to Christ compared to that of God the Father. The Gnostics believed in a demiurge, a being inferior to God that created the world and humanity. To them, Jesus must have been a created being and could not be, as we believe, co-equal to God.

Paul rebuts this as well, saying, “The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created ... all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (1:15–17).

This passage is reminiscent of another (and perhaps more familiar) passage written explicitly to rebut the heresy of the inferiority of Christ: John 1:1–3: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.”

In both cases, the points are clear: Christ is eternal, Christ is God, and all things were created through Christ. All of creation is subject to him; Christ is supreme.

(Today, almost two millennia later, we tend to take our Christology and other foundations of our theology—that is, what we believe about God, Jesus, creation, and humanity, and their natures and relations—for granted. That’s easy to do when we have the Nicene Creed and other historical affirmations of faith, when we are taught from birth that Christ is co-equal with God, when we can read the Bible with that view already fixed in our minds. But it’s good to remember once in a while that the early church spent several hundred years combatting heresies regarding the divinity of Christ.)

Having established this supremacy, Paul writes, “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight” (1:21–22). This is the essence of the gospel. From here, Paul moves on to discuss his own role in the preaching of that gospel.

**Read: Colossians 1:24–2:5**

<sup>24</sup> Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.<sup>25</sup> I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—<sup>26</sup> the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord’s people.<sup>27</sup> To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

<sup>28</sup> He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. <sup>29</sup> To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.

<sup>2:1</sup> I want you to know how hard I am contending for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. <sup>2</sup> My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, <sup>3</sup> in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. <sup>4</sup> I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. <sup>5</sup> For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how disciplined you are and how firm your faith in Christ is.

Paul says, “I rejoice in what I am suffering for you” (1:24). What does he mean, suffering for them? As mentioned earlier, he didn’t found the church at Colossae and probably he’s never been there at all. Furthermore, he says, perhaps somewhat mysteriously, “I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church” (1:24). What is Paul saying here?

First, it is clear that Paul is comparing his own sufferings with those of Christ. He does not do this to show how great he is, or to say that he is earning anything by

it; if anything, Paul is saying that this suffering is part and parcel of being a servant of the gospel.

And what does Paul mean by “Christ’s afflictions”? There is a connection between the sufferings of believers and the sufferings of Christ—the two seem to be intertwined in a way. To be sure, Christians may suffer for the sake of Christ—and again Paul is rejoicing in his sufferings. (There may also be the implication that Christ suffers in some way along with them. On this point, consider Acts 9:4, when Jesus appears in a vision to Paul (Saul): He does not say, “Why do you persecute my church?” or “Why do you persecute my followers?” but “Why do you persecute me?”)

Paul is a ministerial authority, one of the biggest (if not the biggest) stars of Gentile Christendom; he is writing to encourage the Colossians, to let them know that even though he has not met them personally, he is thinking about them, he cares about them and their faith, and he counts them among those for whom he struggles.

2:2–3 is another dig at the heretics. The Gnostics believed in salvation through secret knowledge; but Paul says that “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” are in Christ and that the true mystery to be pursued is the knowledge of Christ himself.

## Discussion

**Question:** Paul talks at length about the supremacy of Christ—how all things have been created through him and for him.

-What does the supremacy of Christ mean for us as believers?

-What effects should the knowledge that Christ is supreme have on the way we live?

**Question:** At our point in history, few of us have to worry about Christological heresies of the sort faced by the early church. However, this does not mean that twenty-first century Christianity is free of heresy.

-What false teachings are present in society today? What “fine-sounding arguments” deceive Christians today?

-How do we keep our faith in Christ firm in the face of such heresies?

**Question:** Paul says that his goal is for the members of the church to “be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (2:2–4).

-What does it mean to know the mystery of God?

-What is the “complete understanding” Paul speaks of here? What does having it do for the believer?

**Lesson 6**  
**Fullness in Christ**  
**Colossians 2:6–23**

**Previously**

Paul, imprisoned in Rome, is writing to the church at Colossae, a church he did not found and has likely never visited. Paul has received news about this church, mostly good, and he is writing in response to this news.

In Colossians 1, Paul is profuse in his thankfulness for the Colossians and for their faith in Christ. Apparently in indirect response to circulating heresies regarding the nature of Christ, Paul presents at some length the supremacy of Christ over all creation and the complete efficacy of his work on the cross.

In Colossians 2, Paul gives further warning against heresies, elaborates on the work of Christ, and provides some guidelines for Christian life.

**Read: Colossians 2:6–7**

<sup>6</sup> So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, <sup>7</sup> rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

Paul is encouraging the Colossians to stay the course. In 2:5, he says, “I ... delight to see how disciplined you are and how firm your faith in Christ is.” They are to continue in this manner. Rooted in Christ, strong in faith, and overflowing with thankfulness, they will be equipped to respond properly to heresy.

**Read: Colossians 2:8–15**

<sup>8</sup> See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.

<sup>9</sup> For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, <sup>10</sup> and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority. <sup>11</sup> In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, <sup>12</sup> having been

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

<sup>13</sup> When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, <sup>14</sup> having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. <sup>15</sup> And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Paul's warning against "hollow and deceptive philosophy" (2:8) builds on his previous warning against being deceived by "fine-sounding arguments" (2:4).

**Question:** What is the difference between these false philosophies and arguments and the truth?

Paul provides an explicit comparison: those things which are false are based on "human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world," while those things which are true are based on Christ. In saying this, Paul is giving further evidence against false teachings of all kinds.

-All the fullness of God is in Christ in bodily form (2:9). This another direct rebuttal of the Gnostic belief discussed last week that Jesus could not have been both fully God and fully man.

-“In Christ you have been brought to fullness” (2:10)—that is, you are complete in him. Furthermore, Christ is the head over every power and authority. Therefore, there is no need or cause to, as some may have been doing, worship angels or spirits or any lesser or created beings.

-“In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands” (2:11)—the Colossians would have been mostly Gentile believers, who would not have been circumcised, a requirement under Jewish law for keeping the covenant. Yet Paul says they *have* been circumcised—by Christ himself. There is no room for works, for earning status by the believer.

2:13–14 is the soul of the Gospel: “When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ.” Christ has taken away condemnation that we could never escape on our own. There is a metaphor here. The accusation against Jesus was nailed to the cross along with him (Matthew 27:37: “Above his head they placed the written charge against him:

‘This is Jesus, the king of the Jews’”). Now, Paul is saying, every accusation against us is nailed to that same cross.

It may slip by us now, but 2:15 is quite a powerful verse. In ancient Rome, a “triumph” was a ceremony held to celebrate the victory of a military commander who had successfully completed a campaign. Such events were granted only rarely, and were as grand and significant a public event as Rome ever had. The conquering general would ride through the streets of Rome in a procession with his victorious army, his captives (including and especially the kings, leaders, and other VIPs he had defeated), and all the treasures he had taken. At the end of this parade, the general would ascend the Capitoline Hill to offer sacrifices at the temple of Jupiter, the king of the Roman gods. Consider this imagery—as the Colossians would have—as we read, “Having disarmed the powers and authorities, [Christ] made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”

**Read: Colossians 2:16–23**

<sup>16</sup> Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day.

<sup>17</sup> These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. <sup>18</sup> Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you. Such a person also goes into great detail about what they have seen; they are puffed up with idle notions by their unspiritual mind. <sup>19</sup> They have lost connection with the head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.

<sup>20</sup> Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: <sup>21</sup> “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”? <sup>22</sup> These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. <sup>23</sup> Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

**Question:** How does this passage connect to Paul’s immediately prior teaching about Christ?

Having discussed in detail the work of Christ and its effects, Paul now presents its implications. His first point is that they should not let anyone judge them on

the basis of what they eat or drink or with regard to their religious observations. “A religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day” (2:16)—these are not heretical practices; they are part of Jewish practices.

You will find arguments that the Colossians were not keeping these practices and were being judged because others thought they should (refer to the early church’s struggle with whether the Gentiles were to follow Jewish law in Acts 15). You will also find arguments that the Colossians *were* keeping these practices and were being judged for it. In either case, the point is the same: none of these practices inherently make a person more spiritual; thus, legalism has no value in a life in Christ, and neither does judgment. (See Romans 14 for a more thorough discussion of this topic, which is encapsulated in verse 17: “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”)

Paul continues his assault on legalism: “Why do you submit to human commands?” he asks. These rules—*do not, do not, do not*—have only the *appearance* of wisdom, he says.

What, then? Is Paul saying that the Christian has the freedom to act in any way he pleases? In the sense of condoning immoral behavior, certainly not. Through this entire letter, Paul has been comparing the beliefs, worldview, and behavior of unbelievers with those of believers, and he is continuing to do this here.

The unbelievers are trying to please God through “their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body” (2:23). That is, they are trying to please God on their own terms and through their own efforts. But following religious observances does not earn you points with God. Fasting, depriving yourself, abusing yourself, as the ascetics did, does not earn you God’s forgiveness. No self-directed religious practice has any value to the Christian.

In contrast to these strivers, the Christian is free in Christ. In Christ, the Christian has nothing to earn, no debt to pay. The Christian is brought to spiritual fullness in Christ solely because of the work of Christ.

This does not mean, however, that the Christian is free of obligation to respond to God: in Colossians 3, Paul goes on to discuss what a life made alive in Christ looks like.

## Discussion

**Question:** Paul admonishes the Colossians to be rooted and built up in Christ, strengthened in faith, and overflowing with thankfulness (2:7).

-The value of being rooted in Christ and strong in faith is rather obvious in the face of heresy, but what is the value of thankfulness given the threat of false teaching?

-What effects does thankfulness have on our thinking and the way we approach life?

**Question:** Paul says that legalistic rules “lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence” (2:23).

-What does he mean by this?

-Beyond not having any positive value, what harm can legalism cause?

**Question:** Much of Paul’s arguments concern rules that are added to religion by people in addition to what God requires. What additions do people still try to make to modern Christianity?

**Question:** What is “fullness in Christ” in practical terms? What does having fullness in Christ mean for our lives?

**Lesson 7**  
**Life in Christ**  
**Colossians 3:1–4:1**

**Previously**

From prison in Rome, Paul writes to the church at Colossae. Their faith is strong, but various false teachings are circulating. In Colossians 1, Paul discusses the supremacy of Christ and the complete efficacy of his work on the cross.

In Colossians 2, Paul encourages the Colossians to continue in the strength of their faith, warning them not to be deceived by false teachings. He draws many contrasts between the life and worldview of the unbeliever, who tries to please God through his own self-directed efforts, and the life and worldview of the believer, who should be rooted in Christ, because Christ has delivered us from sin and given us righteousness all on his own.

The Christian has died with Christ and has been made alive with Christ. Here, then, is what the Christian's response to this wonderful gift should be.

**Read: Colossians 3:1–10**

<sup>1</sup> Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup> Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. <sup>3</sup> For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. <sup>4</sup> When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

<sup>5</sup> Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.

<sup>6</sup> Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. <sup>7</sup> You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. <sup>8</sup> But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. <sup>9</sup> Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices <sup>10</sup> and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

This is not a new topic; Paul is continuing to build upon his previous arguments. Recall that in Colossians 2, Paul discusses at length how believers are to live differently from unbelievers. One of his key points is that we cannot please God, cannot become more spiritual, cannot earn righteousness, through self-driven

and self-directed efforts. No matter how “religious” or “spiritual” they may seem, for Paul, they are “earthly” (3:2).

Instead of focusing on such things, the believer is to focus on “things above, where Christ is.” On what basis? The Christian has died with Christ (2:20) and been raised with Christ (3:1). Everything that needed to be accomplished for the spiritual life of the believer has already been accomplished by the work of Christ. There is no longer any need to follow religious rules. But this does not mean that the Christian is free to live in any way a person might please; to the contrary, being raised with Christ has profound implications for the life of the believer.

“Sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry” (3:5): these are what Paul says must be put to death. These are not simply wrong actions or sinful behaviors to stop doing; each of these is mental and emotional in nature. These problems are not fundamentally external; they are internal, deep-rooted in the sinful human nature.

Paul also identifies some external behaviors that have no place in the life of a Christian: anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language, and lying. All of this should be eliminated, because the believer should be taking on the image of the Creator (3:10). The old self and the new self cannot both flourish at the same time. To use Paul’s imagery, one cannot even “wear” them simultaneously.

Paul has described the earthly nature; he now goes on to present what the godly nature looks like.

**Read: Colossians 3:11–17**

<sup>11</sup> Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

<sup>12</sup> Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. <sup>13</sup> Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. <sup>14</sup> And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

<sup>15</sup> Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. <sup>16</sup> Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. <sup>17</sup> And whatever you do,

whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Verse 11 may at first glance seem out of place in a discussion of sinful versus godly behavior, but within the context, its meaning is clear. “Here there is no...”: where is the “Here”? What does it refer to? “Here” must be in the new self, “in the image of its Creator” (3:10).

In a world filled with social and religious divisions and barriers, there are no such barriers in Christ. This unity in Christ is the foundation for godly interpersonal behavior. Compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, love: these behaviors are not performed in a vacuum. They are displayed to others.

This depiction of life in the community of faith is other-centered, which stands in contrast to the self-centered “false” humility Paul derides in chapter 2. That is, the difference between “true” virtue and “false” virtue is who the intended beneficiary is.

**Read: Colossians 3:18–4:1**

<sup>18</sup> Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

<sup>19</sup> Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.

<sup>20</sup> Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.

<sup>21</sup> Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.

<sup>22</sup> Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. <sup>23</sup> Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, <sup>24</sup> since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. <sup>25</sup> Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism.

<sup>4:1</sup> Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

**Question:** How do these verses relate to what Paul has discussed immediately previous?

Paul has been talking somewhat generally about what life in the community of faith looks like. Now he is narrowing his focus to the basic unit of this community: the household.

Most relevant to us today is what the family of faith looks like (3:18–21). Paul's message is the same here as it was earlier in the chapter, although his instructions have become more specific. *Wives, submit to your husbands.* *Husbands, love your wives.* *Children, obey your parents.* Every command is other-centered and relationship-based.

Paul's points regarding the slave–master relationship are applicable in the modern workplace. Anyone under authority should work with sincerity of heart, as though working for the Lord. Likewise, anyone in authority should treat those under them fairly.

However, the verses about slaves and masters can be troublesome, as can “*Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands.*” Is Paul condoning slavery? Does he believe that women should be subservient to men? We will explore this in greater detail in the next lesson, Philemon, which centers on Paul's relationship with a believing slave and his believing master, but for now, a brief word on where Paul is coming from may suffice.

There is no doubt that Paul recognizes that the world is a sinful place. And he would surely acknowledge that the society in which he lived had deep and serious problems, and that the authorities of the day regularly infringed upon what we would call human rights—after all, he was imprisoned repeatedly and, according to tradition, ultimately executed because of his work for the gospel. But we never hear him talk about reforming society at the broad level.

Paul sees himself has having one job: to preach the gospel—that is, to build the community of faith. At the same time, he is anticipating the return of Christ (see, e.g., 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17), which will result in the end of every flawed and wrongful earthly system. Thus, from Paul's perspective, going after perceived social ills would have been a less productive use of his time than building the church and preparing people for this return. Furthermore, for Paul, the community (and, by implication, society) changes as people change. Thus Paul's focus on how to live within the social status quo rather than on how to change it.

Life is different when you are a believer. This is what the letter to the Colossians is all about. Our earthly life is, in the grand scheme of things, quite short. It is “the Lord Christ” (3:24) we are serving, the Christ who is “the firstborn over all creation” (2:15). This is why we are to set our minds on things above (3:2), and it is why, when Christ returns, we “also will appear with him in glory” (3:4).

## Discussion

**Question:** Paul writes that we are to put to death whatever belongs to our earthly nature (3:5).

-Why is it important to do this?

-How do we put to death the things that belong to our earthly nature?

**Question:** Paul writes, “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things” (3:1–2).

-What would life be like if we truly did this?

-How would life be different?

**Question:** Paul gives specific instructions regarding intra-family relationships.

-What is the connection between the way we act at home, with our family, and the way we act in public, whether among believers or unbelievers?

-What effect does the way we behave within our household have on our Christian life and maturity?

-How can we improve our intra-family relationships (spouse, children, etc.)?

**Question:** How might we apply Paul’s instructions in 3:22–4:1 to improve our relationships in our places of employment?

## Lesson 8 Philemon

Philemon is the shortest of Paul's epistles, and you would surely be forgiven for asking, "Why is this in the Bible?" as many have before. After all, it contains no explicit doctrine.

Philemon is also the most personal of Paul's letters, being addressed to an individual he knows personally rather than to a church (although Paul's greetings (vv. 1–2, 23–24) suggest that he expected the letter to be read to the whole church).

### **Background**

Philemon is a Gentile and a member of the church at Colossae—in fact, he is one of Paul's converts (v. 19). Through the tone of the letter, it is clear that Paul has an affection for Philemon—they are friends. Paul also calls Philemon a "fellow worker," a term he uses to refer to those who also worked to spread the gospel.

One of Philemon's slaves, Onesimus, has run away to Rome (and possibly stolen from Philemon in the process—v. 18), where he has come into contact with Paul and converted to Christianity. Paul is now sending Onesimus, who has become like a son to him (v. 10), back to Colossae with this personal letter.

### **Read: Philemon**

<sup>1</sup> Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker— <sup>2</sup> also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home: <sup>3</sup> Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>4</sup> I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, <sup>5</sup> because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. <sup>6</sup> I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. <sup>7</sup> Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.

<sup>8</sup> Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, <sup>9</sup> yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— <sup>10</sup> that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. <sup>11</sup> Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

<sup>12</sup> I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. <sup>13</sup> I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. <sup>14</sup> But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. <sup>15</sup> Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— <sup>16</sup> no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

<sup>17</sup> So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. <sup>18</sup> If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. <sup>19</sup> I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. <sup>20</sup> I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.

<sup>21</sup> Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

<sup>22</sup> And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers. <sup>23</sup> Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. <sup>24</sup> And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.

<sup>25</sup> The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

**Question:** What does Paul want Philemon to do?

Although the word “forgive” does not appear in the NIV translation of this epistle, this is what Paul is asking Philemon to do: to forgive Onesimus, to welcome him back as he would Paul himself (v. 17), not as a slave, but as a brother in Christ (v. 15).

Slavery in the ancient Roman world was quite a bit different from the slavery of American history: it was based on economics and birth rather than race or capture. Like American slavery, however, slaves had few rights and could be treated more or less as their owners wanted. By law, Onesimus could have been beaten, imprisoned, or possibly killed for having run away.

**Question:** Paul asks and encourages Philemon to accept Onesimus back, but he seems to go out of his way to not command him to do so. Why?

First, Paul has obvious respect and care for Philemon. And while Paul, as he says in verse 8, could compel Philemon to obedience, he wants Philemon to take ownership of this decision. Jesus' words in Matthew 10:8 come to mind: "Freely you have received; freely give." The implication is this: Philemon has received love and forgiveness from God in Christ, and he should now therefore demonstrate this love and forgiveness to Onesimus.

**Question:** What is the message of this letter to believers—both to those in first-century Colossae and to us today?

### **The Problem of Slavery**

The Epistle to Philemon has in the past (along with Ephesians 6:5–9) been used to defend the institution of slavery—whether because Paul never explicitly commands Philemon to free Onesimus or because Paul surely wouldn't have sent another Christian back into slavery if it was so wrong or terrible.

**Question:** Is the Epistle to Philemon pro-slavery? Why or why not?

**Answer:** Paul makes several points to consider.

- Paul encourages Philemon to take Onesimus back "no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother" (v. 16).
- Paul says he could order Philemon "to do what you ought to do" (v. 9).
- Paul's appeal to Philemon is based on love.

As twenty-first-century Americans, we might be inclined to write this letter differently, to take an entirely different line of argument. We might be inclined to say, "Philemon, receive Onesimus back no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother, because slavery is wrong and Christians shouldn't have slaves, and we should get to work on abolishing slavery throughout the Roman Empire."

**Question:** Why doesn't Paul do this?

It is vital to understand Paul's mindset here. In the first place, Paul's priorities are different from what ours as twenty-first-century Americans would probably be. For one thing, Paul is focused on the imminent return of Christ. For example, to

the Thessalonians, he writes, “According to the Lord’s word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever” (1 Thessalonians 4:15–17). Throughout Paul’s letters, it is clear that this is constantly on Paul’s mind.

This triumphant return of Christ will have world-changing effects. Paul writes, “Then the end will come, when [Christ] hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet” (1 Corinthians 15:24–25). In doing so, Christ will abolish slavery and every other injustice, completely and totally, in a way that all the human striving in the world never could.

Second, Paul understands human nature. Paul knows that morality cannot be legislated—that is, you cannot by passing laws (even so-called “Christian” laws) turn sinful people into good people. Good laws do not make good people—not in the sense that Paul thinks of it, in terms of the heart and the things that are within a person. Only the Holy Spirit can make people good.

Twenty-first-century America shows this to be true. Our Constitution has provided for the best laws in history in terms of freedom and equality, and yet sin still prevents them from being fully realized for all people. Racial discrimination is now illegal, yet racism endures. Nor should we be naïve enough to think that if, for example, abortion were legalized, regard for the unborn would suddenly improve to a God-pleasing level.

Likewise, the Law was given to Israel—not for the Jews to earn salvation by following it, but for them to realize by their very inability to follow it their profound need for God and his forgiveness in their lives.

Paul understands all of this extremely well (if you have any doubt, read Romans). In Philemon and elsewhere in the New Testament, we see Paul demonstrating a certain respect or acceptance for the status quo (whether slavery, persecution, imprisonment, or something else that infringes on his human rights and those of other believers), not because he condones it but because he understands that rabble-rousing on this sort of broader societal level is counterproductive to his

work of spreading the gospel, for which he is willing to endure all manner of suffering.

Thus, Paul doesn't make social commentary along the lines of "Society is bad and here's how we should try to fix it." Rather, his message throughout his writings is, "The world is full of sin and suffering. One day, Christ is going to return and wipe away all of it. So let's talk about how you as Christians should behave in the world in the meantime."

What, then? Does this mean we should sit quietly as Christians and not speak out against evil and injustice in the world? May it never be. Sitting quietly is essentially the opposite of everything Paul ever did.

But Paul understands that it is more effective to seek lasting change in individuals, to win hearts and minds to Christ. The changes the believer experiences—specifically, the infusion of love through the Holy Spirit—will change society in a way that laws alone cannot. And the most profound and dramatic transformation of society—the triumphant return of Christ as king—is yet to come.

## Discussion

**Question:** In Philemon, Paul is writing to someone he knows personally, someone who might disagree with him about a sensitive topic.

-How does Paul engage Philemon? With what sort of attitude?

-Do we interact with people with whom we disagree with the same sort of love and respect?

-What are the barriers to us doing so?

**Question:** We may do all right when it comes to disagreements with people we know, people we care about. But many of us behave rather differently with people we don't know so well, whether it's the ignorant instigator on social media, the slow cashier at the store, or the elected official with whose policies we vehemently disagree.

-Why do we tend to be less charitable with these sorts of people?

-Are there any spheres of life in which we as Christians are *not* obligated to act in love?

-Are there any individuals to whom we as Christians are not obligated to deal with in love?

**Question:** Some believe that Paul actually expected Christ to return in his lifetime; in any case, it is clear that the return of Christ was something Paul thought about a great deal. 2,000 years later, however, it is natural that we wouldn't think about this nearly as much.

-How would our behavior be different if we were constantly mindful that Christ will one day destroy "all dominion, authority and power" and "put all his enemies under his feet" (1 Corinthians 15:24–25)?