



# EXPLORE THE BIBLE.®

## Personal Study Guide

Fall 2021 | CSB



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...eing in the form of God, "thoug  
...bery to be equal with God:  
...made himself of no reputation, an  
...pon him the form <sup>2</sup>of a servant, an  
...as made in the likeness of men:  
...<sup>6</sup>And being found in fashion as a man,  
...nabled himself, and <sup>6b</sup>became obedie  
...nto death, even the death of the cross.  
...<sup>9</sup>Wherefore God also <sup>9c</sup>hath highly exa  
...ed him, and <sup>9d</sup>given him a name which  
...above every name:  
...<sup>10</sup> "That at the name of Jesus every kn  
...which ye  
...n me. should bow, of things in heaven, and things  
...in earth, and things under the earth;

<sup>2047</sup> <sup>218</sup> Matt. 26:39, 42; John 10:18; Heb. 5:8; <sup>712</sup> <sup>219</sup> John 1:1-2; Acts 2:33; Heb.  
<sup>60</sup>Eph. 1:20-21; Heb. 1:4 <sup>210</sup> Isa. 49:23; Matt. 28:18; Rom. 8:11; Rev.

... (each) over  
... this priority  
...nd glorified.  
... a church of its  
... Kingdom of God).  
... n, that they stand  
...ected military pride.  
...ad ready for combat  
...renemy's level of strength  
...ss or the distracting entice-  
...re. The church must manifest  
...adness. "One spirit" expresses  
...er's unified attitude. **One mind**  
...e soul") means that believers share  
... Together they prevent divisiveness  
... Paul witnessed at Rome (vv. 14-17).

...love, same accord (lit. "the same soul"), and  
... the same goal (one mind).  
... 2:3-4 Strife or vainglory recalls the prob-  
... lem Paul condemned (1:15, 17). Lowliness,  
... the antidote for wrong attitudes, results  
... in considering others as more important.  
... Additionally, humility considers the inter-  
... ests (things) of others. Proper relationships  
... Include the contrast "not only, but also."  
... Personal responsibilities demand consid-  
... eration, but the concerns of others are  
... equally important.

... 2:5-11 This is one of the most difficult  
... passages in the Bible, prompting various  
... (Gk) *kenosis* (lit. "emptying") theories at-  
... tempting to describe what Jesus gave up in

... on to at all costs). J  
... cing to equality with  
... privileges to become  
... 2:7-8 The phrase ma-  
... tation is much deba-  
... dler what Jesus gave  
... did not divest him-  
... butes. Two statem-  
... verb. First, God the S  
... Form (cp. v. 6) indica-  
... Second, the likeness  
... emptying and servan  
... *homoioomō*) differs f  
... Two statements ex-  
... humbled (cp. v. 3).  
... fashion as a man p

U N D E R S T A N D | E X P L O R E | A P P L Y

## Philippians; Colossians; Philemon



# WHO IS JESUS?

In Paul's Letter to the Philippians, Christ was and is the eternal Son of God who gave up the glory of heaven to become man. He died on a cross for our sins, was raised from the grave, and exalted to the right hand of God, where He reigns today. When He returns, every creature will recognize Him for who He is and confess Him as Lord. He alone is our hope, peace, joy, and strength.

In Colossians, Christ is the One through whom God created all things and is Lord over all creation. He is Creator and Savior. He paid the price for our sin through His death on the cross. He provided forgiveness, canceling our sin debt and rescuing us from its eternal consequences. His death and resurrection make it possible for all who believe in Him to be reconciled to God and to live free from the power of sin. Jesus is supreme; He is Savior; He is sufficient.

In Philemon, Jesus is the One who transforms and restores relationships. He changes how we view people and treat others. He makes all those who share a common faith in Him members of one family—God's family. He is the One who breaks down the barriers that exist between people and unites us as one.

All of this points to our need of Jesus and the life He offers. Right now, He is waiting for you.

- **Admit** to God that you are a sinner. Repent, turning away from your sin.
- **By faith receive** Jesus Christ as God's Son and accept His gift of forgiveness from sin. He took the penalty for your sin by dying on the cross.
- **Confess** your faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. You may pray a prayer similar to this as you call on God to save you: "Dear God, I know that You love me. I confess my sin and need of salvation. I turn away from my sin and place my faith in Jesus as my Savior and Lord. In Jesus' name I pray, amen."

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After you have received Jesus Christ into your life, tell a pastor or another Christian about your decision. Show others your faith in Christ by asking for baptism by immersion in your local church as a public expression of your faith.

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\*Evangelistic Emphasis

# MEET THE WRITER

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# FROM THE TEAM LEADER

Early in his letter, we find Paul calling the Philippians his partners in the gospel (1:5). Paul also challenged Philemon to consider him a partner when making his appeal on behalf of Onesimus (Philem. 17). By extension, this partnership included the church that met in Philemon's home in Colossae. (Archippus is listed by Paul in Col. 4:17 and Philem. 2).

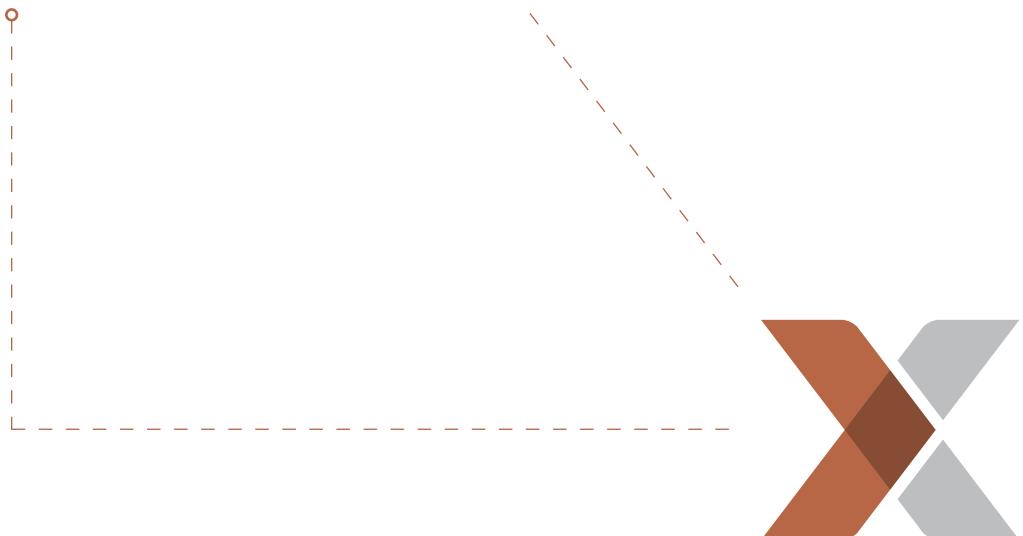
Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon were all written as Paul sat in Rome waiting to appear before Caesar. We can assume this idea of partners was an important thing to Paul as he sat in house arrest. Paul knew he was not alone in taking his stand with Christ. There were partners standing with him, seeking to live Christ-honoring lives in their locations. Paul represented those believers while inside the walls of that Roman house while they represented him outside those walls. They expected each other to represent Christ well in word and in deed, with Paul expressing the joy he found in their partnership. They were counting on each other to do the right thing.

Our shared partnership in the gospel should impact how we live our lives. How we treat each other as believers and a high moral standard should be evident. Our prayer is that as we study Paul's letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon we will gain a deeper appreciation of the partnership we share in Christ.

In His service,

**G. Dwayne McCrary**

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# WORD WISE

**Terms listed here are identified in the Bible commentary with a dot (•).**

**Clement** [KLEM uhnt]—a coworker with Paul and member of the church in Philippi (Phil. 4:3)

**Colossae** [koh LAHS sih]—city in the region of Phrygia, located near Laodicea. The name means “purple wool,” derived from the wool produced and dyed there.

**Epaphroditus** [ih PAF roh DIGH tuhs]—a coworker with Paul and member of the Philippian church; he delivered to the apostle a gift from the Philippian church (Phil. 2:25,29)

**Euodia** [yoo OH dih uh]—a female member of the church at Philippi who had a disagreement with Syntyche; she worked with Paul in the spread of the gospel (Phil. 4:2-3)

**Imperial guard**—the Roman emperor’s elite troops stationed in Rome. The guard was first established by Caesar Augustus, the emperor at the time of Jesus’ birth.

**Laodicea** [lay AHD ih SEE uh]—a city in southwest Asia Minor, ten miles from Colossae; Paul wrote a letter to the church there that has not survived; perhaps best known for its mention in Revelation 3:14-22.

**Macedonia** [MASS uh DOH nih uh]—a Roman province in what is today northern Greece. Paul responded to a vision to preach the gospel there (Acts 16:9-10).

**Philippi** [FIH lih pigh]—a city in the Roman province of Macedonia, what is today northern Greece. Paul first visited Philippi on his second missionary journey in response to his Macedonian vision (Acts 16:9). The church planted there by Paul was the first church in Europe.

**Syntyche** [SIN tih kee]—a female member of the church at Philippi who had a disagreement with Euodia; she worked with Paul in the spread of the gospel (Phil. 4:2-3)

**Thessalonica** [THESS uh loh NIGH kuh]—a city in Macedonia, what is today northern Greece. Paul started a church there on his second missionary journey (Acts 17:1-4) and later wrote two letters to the church.

**Timothy**—missionary partner of the apostle Paul. Paul first met Timothy on his first missionary journey in the area of Lystra (Acts 16:1); he was mentioned by Paul in the salutations of six letters (2 Cor.; Col.; Phil.; 1, 2 Thess.; Philem.) and was the recipient of two letters from Paul (1, 2 Tim.).

# BIBLE READING PLAN

## SEPTEMBER

- 1. Philippians 1:1-2
- 2. Philippians 1:3-5
- 3. Philippians 1:6
- 4. Philippians 1:7-8
- 5. Philippians 1:9-11
- 6. Philippians 1:12-17
- 7. Philippians 1:18-20
- 8. Philippians 1:21
- 9. Philippians 1:22-24
- 10. Philippians 1:25-26
- 11. Philippians 1:27-30
- 12. Philippians 2:1-2
- 13. Philippians 2:3-4
- 14. Philippians 2:5-8
- 15. Philippians 2:9-11
- 16. Philippians 2:12-13
- 17. Philippians 2:14-16
- 18. Philippians 2:17-18
- 19. Philippians 2:19-21
- 20. Philippians 2:22-24
- 21. Philippians 2:25-30
- 22. Philippians 3:1
- 23. Philippians 3:2-3
- 24. Philippians 3:4-6
- 25. Philippians 3:7-9
- 26. Philippians 3:10-11
- 27. Philippians 3:12-14
- 28. Philippians 3:15-17
- 29. Philippians 3:18-21
- 30. Philippians 4:1

## OCTOBER

- 1. Philippians 4:2-3
- 2. Philippians 4:4-7
- 3. Philippians 4:8-9
- 4. Philippians 4:10-12
- 5. Philippians 4:13-14
- 6. Philippians 4:15-18
- 7. Philippians 4:19-20
- 8. Philippians 4:21-23
- 9. Colossians 1:1-2
- 10. Colossians 1:3-6
- 11. Colossians 1:7-8
- 12. Colossians 1:9-12
- 13. Colossians 1:13-14
- 14. Colossians 1:15-17
- 15. Colossians 1:18-20
- 16. Colossians 1:21-23
- 17. Colossians 1:24-26
- 18. Colossians 1:27-29
- 19. Colossians 2:1-3
- 20. Colossians 2:4-5
- 21. Colossians 2:6-7
- 22. Colossians 2:8
- 23. Colossians 2:9-10
- 24. Colossians 2:11-12
- 25. Colossians 2:13
- 26. Colossians 2:14-15
- 27. Colossians 2:16-17
- 28. Colossians 2:18-19
- 29. Colossians 2:20-23
- 30. Colossians 3:1-2
- 31. Colossians 3:3-4

## NOVEMBER

- 1. Colossians 3:5-7
- 2. Colossians 3:8
- 3. Colossians 3:9-10
- 4. Colossians 3:11
- 5. Colossians 3:12-13
- 6. Colossians 3:14-15
- 7. Colossians 3:16-17
- 8. Colossians 3:18-19
- 9. Colossians 3:20-21
- 10. Colossians 3:22
- 11. Colossians 3:23-24
- 12. Colossians 3:25-4:1
- 13. Colossians 4:2
- 14. Colossians 4:3-4
- 15. Colossians 4:5-6
- 16. Colossians 4:7-9
- 17. Colossians 4:10-11
- 18. Colossians 4:12-13
- 19. Colossians 4:14-15
- 20. Colossians 4:16-18
- 21. Philemon 1-3
- 22. Philemon 4-5
- 23. Philemon 6
- 24. Philemon 7
- 25. Philemon 8-10
- 26. Philemon 11-13
- 27. Philemon 14-16
- 28. Philemon 17-18
- 29. Philemon 19-22
- 30. Philemon 23-25

# INTRODUCTION

Paul wrote four letters during his imprisonment in Rome, a period when the apostle was kept under house arrest while awaiting an appearance before Caesar. (See Acts 28:16,30.) This quarter's study looks at three of these letters: Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. Ephesians was the other one.

The contexts and experiences of the letters' original readers were different, so the themes of the letters varied as well. For example, Paul had founded the Philippian congregation (see Acts 16) and still felt a strong personal tie to that church. They shared that emotional bond with him and were concerned about the effects of his imprisonment. To encourage them, he emphasized themes like partnership and joy.

In contrast, Paul had never visited the city of Colossae and likely knew few of the Colossian Christians. However, he understood the pressures they were facing and wanted to minister to them from afar. The attacks of false teachers in Colossae had raised serious questions about the keys to faith and spiritual maturity. So, he reminded them that Jesus was superior to every other spiritual "option," and that His work on the cross was sufficient for salvation. The pervasive theme of Colossians is the sufficiency and supremacy of Christ as head of the church.

Finally, Paul's letter to Philemon represents a short, yet personal note to a friend faced with a difficult choice. Philemon's slave, named Onesimus, had stolen from him and escaped to Rome. There, he had met Paul and come to faith in Jesus. Paul's letter reflects an urgent plea for Philemon to embrace the return of his slave warmly instead of taking advantage of his rights to punish Onesimus. Paul's request was based not on first-century rules governing slavery but on Christian grace toward brothers and sisters in Christ. This brief letter could be read as an example of the truth declared in Galatians 3:28, "There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; since you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Paul's letters to Philippi, Colossae, and Philemon call individuals to a higher standard. They encourage readers toward a deeper relationship with Christ that nurtures deeper relationships with others. More importantly, they provide God's perspective on what it means to live out the gospel in a meaningful way each and every day.

# OUTLINES

## OUTLINE OF PHILIPPIANS

- I.** Salutation (1:1-2)
- II.** Paul's Concerns (1:3-2:30)
- III.** Living the Christian Life (3:1-4:9)
- IV.** Thankfulness (4:10-20)
- V.** Benediction (4:21-23)

## OUTLINE OF COLOSSIANS

- I.** Greeting and Thanksgiving (1:1-12)
- II.** God's Work in Christ (1:13-23)
- III.** Paul's Ministry (1:24-2:3)
- IV.** False Teaching Denounced (2:4-23)
- V.** The Christian Life (3:1-4:6)
- VI.** Conclusion (4:7-18)

## OUTLINE OF PHILEMON

- I.** Paul's Greeting (vv. 1-3)
- II.** Paul's Thanksgiving (vv. 4-7)
- III.** Paul's Appeal (vv. 8-20)
- IV.** Paul's Plans (vv. 21-22)
- V.** Paul's Conclusion (vv. 23-25)



## ON THE COVER

Ruins of store buildings in Laodicea. Laodicea was located in the Lycus Valley near Colossae and Hierapolis. The city was known for an eye ointment that local merchants produced. (See session 8.)

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (11-31-2)



# *Joy in Prayer*

Believers find joy in praying for the spiritual growth of others.

## PHILIPPIANS 1:1-11

Friends who will pray for us are treasured. Their prayers encourage, direct, and challenge us in our spiritual lives. Their prayers create an unbreakable bond with prayer being one way of communicating love for another person. Paul had forged a special relationship with the believers in Philippi, and that relationship grew through genuine prayer that focused on continued spiritual growth.

**How does praying with a person build or strengthen a relationship? Should prayer be a part of every healthy relationship? Explain.**

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# UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

## **PHILIPPIANS 1:1-11**

Paul's connection to the city of Philippi is recorded in Acts 16. During his second missionary journey, the Holy Spirit closed some ministry doors to certain regions he had intended to visit. As he waited for clarity on God's plan, the apostle saw a vision of a Macedonian man pleading for help (Acts 16:6-10). That led to an open door into Greece and the first ministry in what we know as Europe.

Philippi became Paul's first Macedonian stop. Philippi was a Greek city, named for Philip of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great. Despite being Greeks, the residents were considered Roman citizens. Since Paul and his friends began their work among women near a river, it can be supposed that the Jewish population of the city was not strong enough to support a synagogue. However, pagan worship was a powerful force in the community.

Paul's ministry in Philippi included the evangelization of a businesswoman named Lydia, the exorcism of a demon from a young slave girl, persecution, an earthquake, and the salvation of a local jailer and his family (Acts 16:11-34). Eventually, the city's leaders made an official apology for their mistreatment of the apostles (Acts 16:35-40). While the missionaries were encouraged to move on quickly, they refused to leave the city before encouraging the new church that had sprung to life. Several years later, Paul arrived in Rome as a prisoner awaiting trial (Acts 28:11-31). It was during this time of house arrest that he wrote this letter to the Philippians.

Paul's letter to the Philippians essentially served as a "thank you" note for their support during his imprisonment. Based on information contained in the epistle, the Philippian church had sent Paul a gift by the hand of a man named Epaphroditus. Paul also used the letter to teach the believers about topics like suffering, unity, and contentment.

**Read Philippians 1:1-11 in your Bible, noting words and phrases that define the relationship between Paul and the Philippians. How was the relationship impacted by prayer?**

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# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## SHARED FAITH (PHIL. 1:1-2)

<sup>1</sup> Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus: To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons. <sup>2</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

### VERSES 1-2

Paul began with a typical greeting, identifying himself and **•Timothy**. Timothy was a young man from the city of Lystra. He came to Christ under Paul's ministry and later served as one of his travel companions. Paul considered Timothy his own child in the faith (Phil. 2:22; 1 Tim. 1:2), and the young man was probably a loyal visitor during Paul's incarceration in Rome.

Paul described Timothy and himself as **servants of Christ Jesus**. The Greek word for *servant* (*doulos*) can also be used to describe slave, a term that no one in the ancient world would have embraced. Paul was completely surrendered to the authority of Christ.

The apostle directed his greeting to **all the saints** in **•Philippi**. All believers are saints, set apart for God's purposes through Christ. The **overseers and deacons** received special mention. *Overseers* were the pastors who provided spiritual direction, while *deacons* were servant leaders who often met physical needs in the community.

---

### DID YOU KNOW?

Philippi was an ancient city in what today is northern Greece. The church planted there by Paul was the first church in Europe (Acts 16).

**Grace** and **peace** are common elements in Paul's epistles. *Grace* is God's undeserved favor poured out on His people. *Peace* emphasizes a wholeness in every part of life that is produced by Jesus' finished work. Prior to Calvary and the empty tomb, we were living at war with God and were subject to His wrath. Jesus' sacrifice brought

peace and salvation to all who believe. It is possible that Paul placed *grace* before *peace* for a theological purpose. If so, he was reminding his readers that God's grace precedes our peace. Or, said another way, without His grace, we would never know peace.

**What does Paul's greeting say about the connection believers have with one another? What role does a shared faith play in the connection?**

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### **THANKFUL FAITH (PHIL. 1:3-8)**

**<sup>3</sup> I give thanks to my God for every remembrance of you, <sup>4</sup> always praying with joy for all of you in my every prayer, <sup>5</sup> because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. <sup>6</sup> I am sure of this, that he who started a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. <sup>7</sup> Indeed, it is right for me to think this way about all of you, because I have you in my heart, and you are all partners with me in grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. <sup>8</sup> For God is my witness, how deeply I miss all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.**

#### **VERSES 3-5**

Paul had a longstanding relationship with the believers in Philippi. He had been there to help establish the church, and they had stood by him ever since. It makes sense that he would give thanks for this group of Christians.

Paul expressed thankfulness for his friends in every **remembrance** of them. Regardless of the situation, the Philippians were close to Paul's heart. Some other churches had developed deep issues that caused Paul pain. While the Philippians were not perfect, they were a source of pure joy for the apostle.

Paul's gratitude extended to his ongoing prayers on behalf of the Philippians. The tense of the verb used by Paul reveals that he was constantly praying for these believers. He had experienced persecution in Philippi, and he knew that the gospel had enemies there. One way he could offer encouragement and support was through his prayers for them.

Paul was thankful that joy summarized the primary emotion he felt when he thought about the Philippians. Joy stands out as one of the prime themes in this epistle. In verse 4, Paul added to this emphasis by placing **with joy** after **always praying** in the sentence structure.

When considering Paul's joy, it also helps to remember that he was living under house arrest in Rome as he wrote this letter. His current situation paled in comparison to the connection he shared with his friends and with God. This is the first instance in the letter where he indicates the superiority of heavenly joy over earthly circumstances.

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**BIBLE SKILL: Compare verses with the same word.**

The Greek term for *joy* occurs five times in Philippians: 1:4; 1:25; 2:2; 2:29; and 4:1. Read and reflect on the five passages. How does each passage give you a different glimpse into joy as understood by Paul? Based on these verses, how would you summarize Christian joy in three sentences or less?

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One source of Paul's joy was the **partnership in the gospel** that he shared with the Philippians. In a very real way, their cooperation in ministry helped spur his remembrances even more than the gift the church had provided. Later in the letter, Paul would clearly state that his trust for provision rested on Christ alone (Phil. 4:10-12). While he certainly appreciated the gift, he appreciated the shared mission it represented even more.

The Philippians' partnership assured Paul that they were doing good work for the kingdom in their own backyard. They were continuing the work God had started on the **first day** of the church's existence until the present time. Paul's life was tethered to the gospel. Whenever someone accepted Christ through his witness, his heart

was filled with gratitude and joy. When they continued to walk in Christ, those feelings were only enhanced. The Philippians were excellent examples of both—which brought Paul indescribable joy and gave him a reason to be thankful.

**How might viewing other believers as partners in the gospel impact how a person treats those other believers? How does viewing others as partners add to the joy found in the relationship?**

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### VERSES 6-8

As Paul reflected on the good work that was taking place in Philippi, he was **sure of** at least two important things. First, he knew that God inspired **a good work** among the Philippian believers. Some see this work only in the context of salvation. However, the addition of **day of Christ Jesus** indicates something more. Paul saw God’s work across the spectrum that began at the moment of salvation and would find its completion in eternity.

Second, Paul knew that God started it and would see it through **to completion**. The ministry taking place in Philippi would continue to make an eternal difference for the kingdom. The gift that Philippi had provided was a piece of this process. It was evidence of the good work God had begun and a reminder that He would finish the job.

Paul felt like it was only **right** for him to be thankful for the Philippians and to view them with such affection. He found two sources of these feelings. First, he said he held them in his **heart**. In Jewish thought, the heart was the seat of emotions, but Paul wasn’t just expressing a nice sentiment. Their shared experiences had forged a solid emotional and spiritual relationship grounded in Christ.

The other factor that kept the Philippians close to Paul’s heart was the partnership that he had mentioned in verse 5. The Philippian Christians had supported Paul during his imprisonment, even when that would have caused others to step back from him. Instead of pulling away, they joined with him in the **defense and confirmation of the gospel**. As Paul was standing up for Christ in Rome, the Philippians were doing the same in their context—and supporting Paul in the process.

Paul missed his friends in Philippi. He longed for their fellowship. The strong bond they shared was yet another reason for the apostle's gratitude. While he had some measure of freedom under house arrest, he was longing for the fellowship of this tremendous support system.

The phrase ***God is my witness*** takes the form of an oath where Paul called the Lord as a witness to his statement. It underscores both the strength of his connection to Philippi and the sincerity of his feelings toward the believers there. Relationships genuinely formed in Christ produce both unity and gratitude for other members of the body. Such an intense bond never just happens. Paul loved the Philippians with the ***affection of Christ***. Paul's emotional connection to Philippi ran deep.

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### **KEY DOCTRINE: Cooperation**

Christian unity in the New Testament sense is spiritual harmony and voluntary cooperation for common ends by various groups of Christ's people. (See Eph. 4:1-6.)

### **GROWING FAITH (PHIL. 1:9-11)**

**<sup>9</sup> And I pray this: that your love will keep on growing in knowledge and every kind of discernment, <sup>10</sup> so that you may approve the things that are superior and may be pure and blameless in the day of Christ, <sup>11</sup> filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God.**

#### **VERSES 9-11**

Paul took a loving parental tone in his letter. He prayed that their ***love will keep on growing***. A growing love will produce a growing faith and witness. Paul used the Greek word *agape* for love here. In the New Testament, this usually refers to God's self-sacrificing love demonstrated through Jesus. Paul challenged the Philippians to adopt this love for one another. He held up Christ as their model and urged them to let their love grow without boundaries.

Love never grows in a vacuum. Paul said it is nurtured in an environment of ***knowledge*** and ***discernment***. The Greeks emphasized

intellectual knowledge as a virtue. Paul focused on experiential knowledge that comes from doing life with others through the bond of Christ. Discernment relates to morality—the sphere of right and wrong. Personal ethics influence how we choose to demonstrate love toward others. Together, knowledge and discernment highlight the spiritual and practical sides of faith.

### **How are knowledge and discernment connected? How do they complement each other? Why are both needed?**

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For Paul, the Christian faith wasn't just a theoretical concept. To the contrary, it thrives as believers live it out each day. A faith that isn't tangible—that can't be seen or experienced—has little power and even less consequence.

One tangible action relates to what we **approve**. Paul used a word here that means to discern or to test. The idea is to avoid what causes harm and embrace what provides benefit. What we approve determines how we live out our faith in practical ways each day. While the world will chase after the next big thing, Christians are called to focus on the things that really matter—the **superior** things.

He also urged his readers toward lives of integrity. They needed to be **pure and blameless**. Paul knew that a growing faith requires a holy life—a life that will stand above reproach **in the day of Christ**.

Paul turned his attention to the **fruit of righteousness**. In Scripture, fruit often refers to a believer's reflection of Christ to the world. In other words, our character should make it easier for others to see Jesus. The fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23 would be an example of this, but such fruit is impossible without a personal relationship with Christ.

This was Paul's prayer for the Philippians. He longed for them to continue moving toward maturity so Christ could continue working in them. Through this process, believers' ultimate goal—**the glory and praise of God**—is accomplished. As Christians, our primary purpose in life is to glorify God in our words, actions, and attitudes. This is our calling and the main reason we should strive to grow in our faith.

# APPLY THE TEXT

- Believers share a common bond with other believers through faith in Christ.
- Believers can thank God for others who partner with them in kingdom work.
- Our prayers for other believers should include praying for their spiritual growth.

**Take an inventory of your relationships. What role does a shared faith have in each? Which relationships need greater investment because of a shared faith? How?**

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**Think about Paul's gratitude for the Philippians. Who do you feel that way about? How can you share that with them?**

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**Discuss actions that can be taken as a group to foster growth in each other's faith. How can you support one another through these actions?**

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## PRAYER NEEDS

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# *Joy of Adversity*

Believers can face adversity in the joy of knowing the gospel is spread.

## PHILIPPIANS 1:12-26

Christians in some areas of our world face constant pressure. Intimidation, mob beatings, and government censure are just a few of the difficulties faced. These difficulties seem to encourage and not discourage believers, nor do they keep the gospel from spreading. These believers seem to have a greater focus, just like the focus of an athlete trying to improve or train for a sport. But unlike many athletes, these believers find joy and peace in the middle of the challenges faced.

**What are some motivations that might lead a Christian to be a faithful, even joyous, witness in unfavorable circumstances?**

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# UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

## **PHILIPPIANS 1:12-26**

Paul opened his letter with a sincere expression of gratitude (Phil. 1:1-11). The Philippian believers had sent him a gift, and he wanted them to know he appreciated their support. But even more importantly, he wanted to thank them for their partnership in the gospel. Paul's passion drove him to share the gospel, and others who shared that passion were important to him. He was sure that God would continue to bless the Philippians' faithfulness as they grew in their relationship with Christ.

From there, Paul shifted to a discussion of his sufferings and its impact on his ministry. He chose to see his house arrest as a positive rather than a negative. He was getting the opportunity to share Jesus with the elite squad of soldiers who were guarding him day and night. That would not have been possible under different circumstances.

Paul's chains were also encouraging others to share their faith more boldly. Even those who witnessed with the wrong motives were being used by God to spread the gospel.

Paul saw the gospel as his only reason for living. If God decided to let him die, he would spend eternity with Christ. But if God spared his life, he would leave Rome a free man and keep doing the things he had been doing.

In his heart, Paul believed God was not done with him yet. He expected to be released; until then, he would serve Christ faithfully to the best of his ability. He would share the gospel with everyone who crossed his path, and he would continue to encourage believers in churches like Philippi to grow in faith and boast in Christ.

**Read Philippians 1:12-26 in your Bible and underline words and phrases that point to Paul's purpose. How did Paul's purpose impact his joy even when facing challenges?**

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# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## OPEN DOORS (PHIL. 1:12-14)

<sup>12</sup> Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually advanced the gospel, <sup>13</sup> so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard, and to everyone else, that my imprisonment is because I am in Christ.

<sup>14</sup> Most of the brothers have gained confidence in the Lord from my imprisonment and dare even more to speak the word fearlessly.

### VERSES 12-13

Paul wanted his *brothers and sisters* in Philippi to understand how God was using his circumstances. He was seeing God make the most of what others might call a bad situation. The apostle focused on the bigger picture. His passion was to share Christ with others, and his imprisonment had *advanced the gospel* in unexpected ways.

Of course, his struggles didn't start in Rome. He had endured accusations, chains, and trials before Jews and Gentiles (Acts 24–25). He had even survived a shipwreck while traveling to Rome (Acts 27:13-44). But his work there—even in difficulty—was bearing fruit and proving that the gospel could not be chained.

During his house arrest, Paul was witnessing to the *whole •imperial guard*. He was making sure they heard about the Savior for whom he suffered. It has been suggested that Roman guards rotated every four hours, dropping new “mission fields” into Paul's lap several times a day. The captive preached to a captive audience.

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### DID YOU KNOW?

The term *imperial guard* or *palace guard* referred to the Roman emperor's elite troops stationed in Rome. The guard was first established by Caesar Augustus, the emperor at the time of Jesus' birth. It was originally composed of around ten thousand handpicked soldiers, though later emperors increased their numbers.

## VERSE 14

Along with his own opportunities to witness, Paul recognized a new **confidence** in others as well. Apparently, some Christians had lacked confidence in sharing their faith in the past. But now they were gaining courage because of Paul's boldness. They were sharing the gospel **fearlessly**. Paul's example was enough to challenge them to step out of their comfort zones and stand boldly for Christ.

**How does persecution open the door for sharing Jesus?  
What examples might be pointed to in answering this question?**

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## MISSION ACCOMPLISHED (PHIL. 1:15-18)

**<sup>15</sup> To be sure, some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of good will. <sup>16</sup> These preach out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel; <sup>17</sup> the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, thinking that they will cause me trouble in my imprisonment. <sup>18</sup> What does it matter? Only that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is proclaimed, and in this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice**

## VERSES 15-17

As Paul evaluated the spread of the gospel around Rome, he identified two different groups. The first shared the gospel out of **envy and rivalry**. The second group preached Christ from a pure heart—what Paul called **good will**. While the message of each group was the same, their motivations were different. The members of the second group evangelized out of a genuine **love** for Jesus and for Paul. They knew that Paul was a prisoner of Christ and appreciated his suffering in **defense of the gospel**. As a result, they were eager to partner with him at a time when his opportunities were limited. The motives of the first group weren't as pure. They preached out of **selfish ambition**. They were hypocrites but apparently not heretics. They simply wanted to use Christ as a weapon against Paul, hoping to frustrate and discourage him.

## VERSE 18

For Paul, the only thing that mattered was that ***Christ is proclaimed***. God was blessing the message regardless of the motives of the messenger. Whether their motives were pure or corrupt, God was big enough to bring people to Himself. That's the power of God and the power of the gospel. As a result, Paul would ***continue to rejoice***. He wouldn't condone wrong motives but would leave that situation in God's hands. He chose to celebrate the results of the preaching.

**Why was it important for Paul to focus on the results and not the motives? How did focusing on the results impact Paul's joy?**

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### KEY DOCTRINE: *Evangelism and Missions*

It is the duty of every child of God to seek constantly to win the lost to Christ by verbal witness undergirded by a Christian lifestyle, and by other methods in harmony with the gospel of Christ. (See 2 Tim. 4:5.)

## GOD HONORED (PHIL. 1:19-21)

**<sup>19</sup> because I know this will lead to my salvation through your prayers and help from the Spirit of Jesus Christ. <sup>20</sup> My eager expectation and hope is that I will not be ashamed about anything, but that now as always, with all courage, Christ will be highly honored in my body, whether by life or by death. <sup>21</sup> For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.**

## VERSE 19

Paul was confident of his deliverance from his current circumstances. The Greek word translated ***know*** carries a sense of certainty because a matter is settled, while ***salvation*** refers here to a rescue from death. Of course, that could mean a deliverance from Caesar, but it also could have deeper eschatological meaning—Paul's ultimate rescue through death. The latter fits the context of life and death in verses 20-21.

The apostle attributed his confidence to two things. First, he knew that the Philippians (and others) were praying for him. Their **prayers** on his behalf provided encouragement and strength in a difficult situation. Those prayers also worked in concert with the work of **the Spirit**. Paul never doubted that God was moving behind the scenes, making the most of his situation.

#### VERSE 20

Paul's main goal—his **eager expectation and hope**—was that God would be honored through him. Paul believed he would never stand **ashamed** before Christ because every sin had been covered by Jesus' death on the cross. In response, he wanted Christ to be glorified at every turn, whether he was standing before Caesar on earth or standing before the Lord in eternity.

Instead of being ashamed, Paul wanted Jesus to be **highly honored** in his physical body. (See also 1 Cor. 6:19-20.) His entire being, including his body, was God's property. From his perspective, a genuine commitment to Christ apart from our bodies was unthinkable because God uses our words and actions to point others toward Jesus.

What's more, Paul put no limits on how Jesus could be honored. Whether it be **by life or by death**, the important thing was God's glory. Nothing else mattered.

#### VERSE 21

Paul never feared death. In fact, he viewed life and death as a win-win situation. On one hand, living on earth was living for his Savior: **to live is Christ**. He could not conceive of a physical existence that was not sold out for the glory of Jesus. If he survived his trial before the emperor, he would serve Christ as he had since his conversion. His life would be lived according to Jesus' plans for him.

Paul also knew that this world is not the end of the story. That meant dying for Christ was **gain**. He knew he would experience incredible freedom the moment he took his last breath. Paul preferred death since it would mean an end to his earthly struggles and the start of an eternity in the presence of Christ.

The passage indicates that Paul expected to be released at some point. But whether he lived or died, Christ would be in control, and Christ would be honored.

## How does the promise of eternity in the presence of Christ impact how Paul viewed life and death?

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### CHRIST ALONE (PHIL. 1:22-26)

<sup>22</sup> Now if I live on in the flesh, this means fruitful work for me; and I don't know which one I should choose. <sup>23</sup> I am torn between the two. I long to depart and be with Christ—which is far better— <sup>24</sup> but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for your sake. <sup>25</sup> Since I am persuaded of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, <sup>26</sup> so that, because of my coming to you again, your boasting in Christ Jesus may abound.

#### VERSES 22-24

*In the flesh* was Paul's reference to physical existence. He knew that he would die someday, but God had allowed him to live through so much already. As long as he lived, he would continue the *fruitful work* of sharing the gospel. He would keep ministering and sharing the gospel. He was confident that his efforts would expand the kingdom. Still, he felt a tension between the "now" and the "then." In either case, Christ would be the center of his life. But Paul struggled to know which one to *choose*—which option was better.

Paul was *torn* between two choices. As mentioned earlier, he knew that this world was not really his home. If he could *depart and be with Christ*, he would be plugging into something greater than he could ever imagine. For many, this might seem strange—not just that Paul was willing to die, but that he was eager to die. The apostle didn't have a death wish. Instead, he longed for the intimacy with Christ that only His presence could provide. Life on earth could not hold a candle to what He knew awaited him in heaven.

But Paul's personal feelings weren't the issue. If God still had work for him to do—and he was leaning that way—his continued ministry was *more necessary* in God's agenda. Believers across the Roman Empire, including in Philippi, needed his encouragement. Plus, so many people still didn't know about Jesus, and Paul was eager to tell them before he left this world.

## VERSES 25-26

Paul realized he would be around a little longer. He was *persuaded* that the emperor would dismiss the complaints against him, freeing him to expand his ministry. His focus would be on evangelism and on building others up so they could grow in their faith and increase their joy. The word translated *progress* was also used to describe the advance of the gospel in verse 12. His hope was that believers would grow just as the gospel had spread in Rome.

In every situation, Paul was all about Jesus. Whatever happened, he wanted Christ to be exalted—even if that meant waiting on eternity. The needs of others took priority, so he would work until his task was ultimately complete. That desire to honor Christ was also what he longed to see in others.

The text indicates that Paul completely expected to make a return trip to Philippi one day—maybe sooner rather than later. When that happened, he wanted their *boasting* to be about Christ, not the apostle. Paul never missed an opportunity to make a big deal of Jesus, and he told the Philippians to do the same.

**How does seeing others grow in their faith encourage the one who is helping them do so? How are both benefited?**

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**BIBLE SKILL:** *Read a passage looking for a grammatical feature.*

Read Philippians 1:12-26 with a pencil in hand and circle every occurrence of the personal pronouns “I,” “me,” and “my.” How did the use of these personal pronouns underscore the genuineness of Paul’s personal testimony? What emotions might the Philippians have felt about the personal nature of Paul’s words?

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# APPLY THE TEXT

- Persecution for the gospel leads to opportunities to share the gospel.
- Faithful proclaimers of the gospel keep their focus on its advance, not on personal slights or distractions.
- Believers honor God by being faithful to Him in life and in death.
- The encouragement of other believers produces joy and purpose in the one who encourages.

**Discuss as a group some “open doors” God is providing for you and the members of your Bible study group. What can the group do to encourage each other to walk through those doors with boldness?**

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**List the names of people who demonstrate the same purpose and attitude of Paul. What can you learn from these people that will help you remain faithful to Christ?**

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**Who do you know that needs to be encouraged in his or her spiritual life? How can you use insights from this study to encourage them?**

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## PRAYER NEEDS

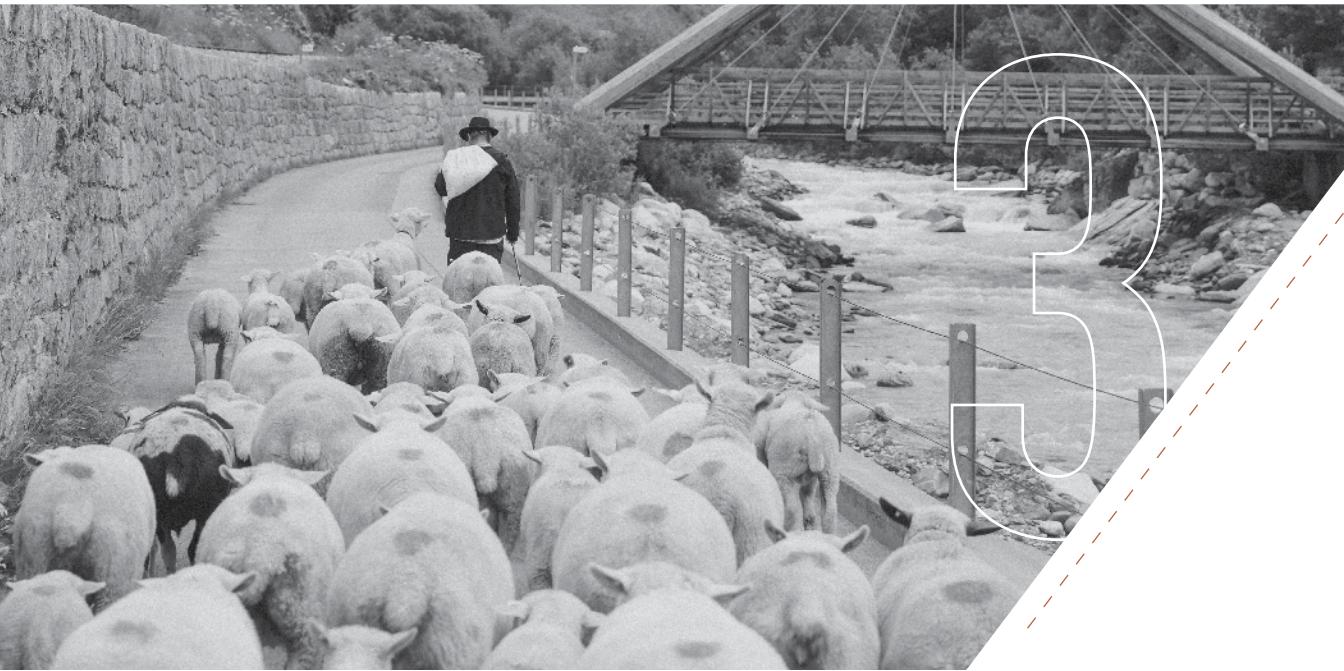
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# *Joy Through Humility*

Believers find joy through humbly following Christ in all circumstances.

## **PHILIPPIANS 2:1-15**

Sometimes we see genuine humility as the enemy of joy. To be humble, we think we must consider ourselves unworthy and therefore not able to enjoy life. But Jesus was humble *and* joyful. For Jesus, humility was not about feeling inferior; He made some rather lofty claims about Himself. Rather, His humility was more a matter of putting others and their needs above of His own.

**Can genuine humility exist alongside the other recognized qualities of a strong leader? How can assertiveness and humility co-exist in the same personality?**

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# UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

## **PHILIPPIANS 1:27–2:30**

While Paul thought he would eventually be freed from his Roman imprisonment, he didn't take it for granted. He knew he might die and was at peace with whatever God planned (Phil. 1:21-26).

Paul could live with this perspective because he knew this world was not his home. Like his Philippian readers, his citizenship rested in heaven (1:27). While they were living and breathing on earth, their final destination—their ultimate home—was spiritual, not physical. They needed to live like citizens of heaven (1:28-30), standing firm in their faith and living worthy of the gospel. Such a lifestyle should be the rule, rather than the exception, for anyone who claims Christ. But Paul made it clear this wasn't just a personal issue; it affected the entire church. As believers stood together in unity, the church would be stronger (2:1-4). Christians are called to also look out for the needs of others.

Unity doesn't simply happen. It's a by-product of humility. No one provided a greater example of humility than Jesus (2:5-11). God's Son temporarily set aside the riches of heaven to become a man. While that choice eventually led to incredible glory, He had to pass through a humiliating death.

Believers who choose this path of humility bless one another and honor the Savior. They also make a difference in the world (2:12-18). They shine like the stars, drawing attention to Jesus and His glory.

To help the Philippians, Paul promised to send two of his partners. Timothy would give the Philippians an update on his status and then report back to him about them. He would also send Epaphroditus, who originally served as a messenger from Philippi. In Rome, Epaphroditus had gotten sick and almost died. But Paul would present him back to the Philippians as an example of God's mercy and grace. He challenged them to embrace him like true believers—with unity and humility.

**Read Philippians 2:1-15 in your Bible and underline the commands. How is each command tied to humility?**

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# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## IN RELATIONSHIPS (PHIL. 2:1-4)

**<sup>1</sup> If, then, there is any encouragement in Christ, if any consolation of love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, <sup>2</sup> make my joy complete by thinking the same way, having the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Everyone should look not to his own interests, but rather to the interests of others.**

### VERSES 1-2

For us, the word *if* usually raises doubts. But for ancient Greeks, and in Paul's rhetorical questions here, it conveyed certainty. The word can also be translated "since," which assumes something is true. Specifically, Paul was emphasizing the bond Christians shared as members of Christ's body.

Paul highlighted certain things that are real and true. First, he pointed out *encouragement in Christ*. The man under house arrest knew the power of finding strength and support in his relationship with Jesus.

Paul also mentioned *consolation of love* and *fellowship with the Spirit*. Christianity is primarily about love—the love we receive from God and the love we share with others. To describe our fellowship with God's Spirit, Paul used the Greek word *koinonia*—the same word translated "partnership" in 1:5. Christians are partners with one another through a shared relationship with the Spirit.

Finally, Paul mentioned *affection and mercy*, underscoring the spiritual connection we share. Believers demonstrate tenderness and sympathy toward one another. Nothing excited Paul more than seeing people he cared about drawing closer to Christ and to one another. They could make his *joy complete* by living out those qualities in Christian unity.

If verse 1 outlines the results of Christian unity, then verse 2 reveals what that harmony should look like. It starts with believers *thinking the same way*. Like-mindedness doesn't mean everyone has to agree on everything. Instead, Christians work together toward a

common goal—the glory of Christ. Unity also demonstrates the **same love** for one another.

Believers should stand **united in spirit** and remain focused on **one purpose**. Everyone must pull in the same direction, rejecting anything that distracts us from the mission of sharing the gospel.

#### VERSES 3-4

Paul challenged his friends to get rid of any **selfish ambition or conceit**. The apostle had identified such attitudes in the false preachers in 1:17, but he urged the Philippians to practice **humility** instead. When we see ourselves from this perspective, we see the needs of others as **more important** than our own. That's not to say that our personal problems aren't important. The wording implies we have a responsibility to look after our **own interests**, but watching out for ourselves comes naturally. We don't need instructions for self-preservation. Paul was challenging believers to do a better job of paying attention to the **interests of others**.

**How does selfish ambition get in the way of serving others?**

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#### BY EXAMPLE (PHIL. 2:5-11)

<sup>5</sup> Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited. <sup>7</sup> Instead he emptied himself by assuming the form of a servant, taking on the likeness of humanity. And when he had come as a man, <sup>8</sup> he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death — even to death on a cross. <sup>9</sup> For this reason God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow—in heaven and on earth and under the earth— <sup>11</sup> and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

#### VERSES 5-6

Before the Philippians could understand how to humbly serve, they needed to know what humility looked like. Paul pointed them to Jesus.

Believers are connected to Christ in a powerful way, so it makes sense that He serves as our role model in everything, including humility.

For starters, Paul said to **adopt the same attitude** as their Savior. The apostle emphasized the active nature of pursuing Christ's example of humility. But this action is also tied to a mindset. To act like Christ, we first learn to think like Christ.

To understand Jesus' humility, we must remember that Jesus eternally existed with the Father and the Spirit before Bethlehem. Using what was likely an early Christian hymn, Paul pointed out that Christ existed in the **form of God**. In other words, Jesus was (and is) completely divine—possessing all the power and authority of the Godhead. He was fully God.

Despite that **equality with God**, Jesus voluntarily limited some of His attributes for the sake of humanity. His divinity was not something to be **exploited**. The Greek wording here means something to hold or to grasp. While Jesus never lost a hint of His divinity on earth, He did temporarily set aside some privileges and glory of His heavenly citizenship.

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### **KEY DOCTRINE: *God the Son***

Jesus perfectly revealed and did the will of God, taking upon Himself human nature with its demands and necessities and identifying Himself completely with mankind yet without sin. (See Col. 1:15-20.)

### **VERSES 7-8**

Having described how Jesus humbled Himself, Paul explained how Christ revealed this humility on earth. In contrast to clutching His rights and privileges, Jesus **emptied himself**. The King of all creation accepted flesh and bone, embracing the **form of a servant**.

Christ voluntarily veiled some of His divine attributes to accept the attributes of a man. For example, as a human, Jesus was limited by time and space. This does not mean Jesus became less God during His time on earth. Instead, He added full humanity to His complete deity. His outward appearance perfectly matched the inward calling of the incarnation.

Jesus took on the **likeness of humanity**. John wrote that Jesus (the Word) “became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). Jesus came to earth **as a man** to save humanity from our sin (Mark 10:45). From a human perspective, He was ordinary, looking similar to every other first-century Jew in Palestine.

### **What is the importance of understanding Jesus as both fully human and fully God at the same time?**

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Jesus chose to be **obedient** to the Father’s plans. That involved experiencing every aspect of being human—apart from sin. Eventually that led Him **to the point of death**. Paul pointed out that Jesus died **on a cross**. While we might gloss over that statement, first-century readers would have felt the full weight of Paul’s words. Crucifixion was a sadistic and humiliating punishment reserved for Rome’s worst criminals. Crucifixion was so hideous, Roman citizens were exempt from it as a sentence. For a Jew, it was considered a curse (Deut. 21:22-23), further adding to Jesus’ indignity.

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#### **BIBLE SKILL: Pray a set of related passages.**

Use a Bible concordance to look for uses of the words “humble” and “humility” in verses about Jesus. What do the verses you identified reveal about Jesus and true humility? Select five of these verses and make each verse a prayer over a five-day period. How did living with these verses in mind impact your relationships with family, friends, and coworkers?

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#### **VERSES 9-11**

The cross was not the end of Jesus’ story. The grave remains empty because God raised Christ from the dead. Paul emphasized that the humiliated Savior now reigns as the victorious King.

At this point, the hymn shifts gears, as the Father becomes the prime actor. He **highly exalted** Jesus, a term that could be translated “super-exalted.” Jesus returned to His pre-incarnate place in heaven as Savior and Lord. The Father also gave His Son the **name that is above every name**. In ancient thought, names reflected one’s character and authority. The name of Jesus saves the lost and makes demons tremble. No one stands above Christ.

As Savior and Lord, Jesus deserves—and will receive—honor and worship from humanity. Paul noted that **every knee will bow**. All humanity, living and dead, will bend their knees to acknowledge Jesus and worship Him.

In addition, **every tongue will confess** the lordship of Christ. The physical act of bowing will be accompanied by the verbal act of confession. Again, everyone is included. All people will honor the Son, which will bring glory to **the Father**.

The confession identified here does not mean that everyone will be saved. Salvation depends on the timing of our submission. Those who acknowledge Christ and confess Him as Savior and Lord on earth will spend eternity with Him. Those who bow and confess after death will do so in judgment—and spend eternity separated from Him.

## IN LIFESTYLE (PHIL. 2:12-15)

**<sup>12</sup> Therefore, my dear friends, just as you have always obeyed, so now, not only in my presence but even more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. <sup>13</sup> For it is God who is working in you both to will and to work according to his good purpose. <sup>14</sup> Do everything without grumbling and arguing, <sup>15</sup> so that you may be blameless and pure, children of God who are faultless in a crooked and perverted generation, among whom you shine like stars in the world,**

### VERSES 12-13

Some people wrongly contend that Paul’s command to **work out your own salvation** smacks of “works theology”—that he was teaching that people earn God’s favor. But this contradicts what Paul was teaching in verses 5-11 and all his other writings. (See Eph. 2:8-10.)

Paul wanted the Philippians to live out their salvation in practical ways. As believers, our works do not *provide* our salvation, but they

*prove* our salvation to the world. We are called to act like we've been saved.

The Philippians' works would reveal a **God who is working**. God didn't simply save them from their sin and leave them to fend for themselves. Instead, He was actively working in their lives to accomplish His **good purpose**.

**Why should believers be reminded that God is at work in their lives as they seek to live out their salvation?**

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### VERSES 14-15

Emphasizing this call to action, Paul told the Philippians to get to work. They had things to **do** in their journey of faith. Along with focusing on what we do for God, he also challenged believers to evaluate *how* we do those things. Specifically, our works should avoid **grumbling and arguing**. The Greek word for *grumbling* relates to a poor attitude—the opposite of the mind of Christ (v. 5). The term for *arguing* was often used in lawsuits and court cases. Both display a clear lack of humility and make unity next to impossible.

Along with strengthening the church's unity, living with proper humility provides a witness to the world. Paul used three similar words to describe believers focused on living out their faith each day: **blameless, pure, and faultless**. Each term relates to the others and reflects the idea of completion or maturity.

This description of integrity and innocence reflects the character of God and stands in stark contrast to the **crooked and perverted** world. While Christ's followers work hard at following a godly path, others work hard to twist and manipulate things for their own benefit. God expects His children to look like Him, not be conformed to the shape of the prevailing culture (Rom. 12:2).

Sadly, the unsaved wander in darkness, unaware of God's expectations and standards. They cannot find their way, which is why God's people must **shine like stars in the world**. Living out our faith each day provides a light and reveals a better way.

# APPLY THE TEXT

- Humble service should characterize all believers.
- Jesus humbled Himself by dying for our sins on the cross, setting the standard of humble obedience.
- God is honored by humble believers who display godly character.

**How well do you and the members of your Bible study group respond to the needs of others? How can the group hold one another accountable for responding to the needs of others?**

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**How does your life reflect the attitude demonstrated by Jesus? What keeps you from following Him with complete obedience?**

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**Evaluate your life in terms of exhibiting godly character. What needs to change for you to demonstrate God's character in a greater way?**

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## PRAYER NEEDS

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# *Joy in Knowing Jesus*

Believers gain joy through knowing Jesus and living in obedience to Him.

## PHILIPPIANS 3:8-21

Goals help us establish new behaviors, keep us focused on a desired outcome, and serve as guides that help us sustain some type of momentum to keep going. Some goals may be steps toward a larger goal like running three miles a day with the hope of eventually running a marathon. We set goals for all kinds of things, including physical fitness, skills, and financial goals. But what about setting spiritual goals? What would a spiritual goal look like? Paul gives us some clues in Philippians chapter 3.

**What do goals reveal about a person's priorities and view of self? What do spiritual goals reveal about a person's view of salvation and God?**

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# UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

## **PHILIPPIANS 3:1-21**

Following the hymn about humility (Phil. 2:1-15), Paul provided the Philippians with two living examples of humility—Timothy and Epaphroditus (2:19-30). Both men had suffered for the sake of the gospel. Epaphroditus, who likely came to Paul on behalf of the Philippian church, even faced death. Paul was gratefully sending him back in good health with the assurance that he had faithfully completed his responsibilities.

Paul warned the Philippian congregation against falling for the lies of false teachers—specifically, those who took pride in circumcision (3:2). The apostle pointed out that these heretics were not examples of humility. They were self-righteous legalists pulling the Philippians away from the true faith.

Paul reminded the Philippians that if legalism could lead to salvation, he would be standing at the front of the line. His credentials as a pious Jew were unsurpassed (3:4-6). But none of that mattered since encountering Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus. Instead of being zealous for the law, Paul was now zealous for the gospel. The driving force of his life was to know Jesus better every day—even if that meant suffering for His sake (3:7-11).

Paul realized he was not perfect. Unlike the legalists, he understood that salvation wasn't gained by keeping rules. It was the result of a relationship with Christ that would not be completed until eternity. As a result, Paul was ready to leave behind all the "good stuff" he had done and pursue his new goal of becoming more like Jesus (3:12-14).

He challenged the Philippians to follow his example. The enemies of the cross would meet their end in God's timing. But those who chose Christ would be transformed into His image. They were citizens of heaven and needed to live that way on earth (3:16-21).

**Read Philippians 3:8-21 in your Bible. How would you describe the impact of Jesus on Paul's life?**

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# EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

## **RIGHTEOUSNESS GAINED** (PHIL. 3:8-11)

**<sup>8</sup> More than that, I also consider everything to be a loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Because of him I have suffered the loss of all things and consider them as dung, so that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own from the law, but one that is through faith in Christ—the righteousness from God based on faith. <sup>10</sup> My goal is to know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death, <sup>11</sup> assuming that I will somehow reach the resurrection from among the dead.**

### **VERSES 8-9**

When it came to obeying the law, few people could hold a candle to Paul. From a purely Jewish perspective, he checked all the boxes. But Paul realized that the good deeds he had done to please God never moved him closer to God. He found purpose once he switched directions and pursued the *surpassing value of knowing Christ*.

Paul had lost many things, but those earthly accomplishments were essentially *dung*—waste that could not be compared to knowing Jesus. While some translations try to soften Paul's wording here, the vivid intensity of the contrast accurately states how Paul felt about his old way of life.

Paul understood that the secret to a purpose-filled life on earth was to live in Christ. He wanted to be *found in him*. In the past, he had tried hard to please God by keeping rules, a *righteousness of my own from the law*. But Paul had learned that he could never save himself, no matter how much he tried. His only hope was a relationship with God *based on faith*. Righteousness—pleasing God—is a gift from God and faith in Him is the only access point. We can't add to anything He has done.

**What makes salvation through faith in Jesus alone superior to seeking salvation through keeping a set of rules or the law?**

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## VERSES 10-11

Paul's primary purpose in life was to **know him**. This wasn't just an intellectual knowledge. It was intimate knowledge based on personal experience. He saw this spiritual intimacy with Christ demonstrated in two ways. First, he wanted to live in the **power of his resurrection**. For believers, Jesus' resurrection provides the power for living. Second, Paul wanted to share in the **fellowship of his sufferings**. Though he would never presume that his sufferings would accomplish salvation as Jesus' had, he did believe that dying to self would further transform him into Christ's image. That made every pain worthwhile.

Death held no terror for Paul. He looked forward to entering Christ's presence. By sharing Jesus' sufferings and relying on the power of His resurrection, Paul was steadily moving toward his own **resurrection**. He knew that his salvation began at conversion when Christ gave him new life. But he also saw salvation as a process that would culminate in eternity.

The idea of **assuming** his eventual resurrection was not an expression of doubt for Paul. He was confident of his eternal destiny with Christ. Instead, he was emphasizing the complete sufficiency of Christ in salvation. It's also instructional for contemporary believers who are still prone to try earning God's favor through good works. When we do, we miss the point of our relationship with Him. Rejecting our own righteousness—and striving to understand and apply Jesus' righteousness each day—is just as important now as it was for Paul in the first century.

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### **BIBLE SKILL:** *Respond to reading a Bible passage.*

Focus on Philippians 3:10, reading the verse aloud by placing more emphasis on different words each time you read it. Which word when read aloud most impacted you and why? How did emphasizing each word help you gain a deeper understanding of Paul's desire expressed in this verse?

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## SANCTIFICATION BEGUN (PHIL. 3:12-14)

<sup>12</sup> Not that I have already reached the goal or am already perfect, but I make every effort to take hold of it because I also have been taken hold of by Christ Jesus. <sup>13</sup> Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and reaching forward to what is ahead, <sup>14</sup> I pursue as my goal the prize promised by God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus.

### VERSE 12

Paul didn't simply pursue Christ in anticipation of his resurrection. He understood that knowing Christ offered benefits on earth. While believers receive the fullness of Christ's righteousness at salvation, they continue to become more like Him through the lifelong process of sanctification. It could be that the false teachers were preaching a sinless perfection through the law, but Paul acknowledged he was still a work in progress—though with a confidence in God's final result. He denied he had **reached the goal** and said that he was not **perfect**. Still, he worked hard—not to earn salvation but to cooperate fully with God's sanctification. The more mature believers grow, the more they see their own weaknesses. Paul determined to keep pressing on, with Christ serving as his motivation.

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### KEY DOCTRINE: *Sanctification*

Growth in grace should continue throughout the regenerate person's life. (See 1 Cor. 3:1-8.)

### VERSES 13-14

For Paul, sanctification involved two particular actions. The first was **forgetting what is behind**. The idea comes from running, which was a popular ancient sport. Those who compete in a race refuse to look back because it slows them down. Paul could not afford to focus on the past. The second part of sanctification was **reaching forward**. Like a runner, Paul strained every spiritual muscle to make progress. His hope for spiritual maturity would be to maintain focus on his eventual destination.

Like a runner, Paul's ultimate desire was to capture *the prize*, the fullest possible knowledge of Jesus. Sanctification was spiritual training, like the intense effort that athletes put into their craft. But the spiritual rewards were so much greater than any winner's wreath earned on earth (1 Cor. 9:25).

In ancient races, winners were called by name to stand and receive their reward. By following the *heavenly call*, Paul was rejecting earthly things that would hinder him from knowing Jesus better. One day, he would be called to give an account of his work for the kingdom.

**What might cause a believer to stop moving forward in his or her spiritual growth? How does looking toward heaven serve as a motivator for the believer to keep growing?**

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## **WARNING ISSUED** (PHIL. 3:15-19)

**<sup>15</sup> Therefore, let all of us who are mature think this way. And if you think differently about anything, God will reveal this also to you. <sup>16</sup> In any case, we should live up to whatever truth we have attained. <sup>17</sup> Join in imitating me, brothers and sisters, and pay careful attention to those who live according to the example you have in us. <sup>18</sup> For I have often told you, and now say again with tears, that many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. <sup>19</sup> Their end is destruction; their god is their stomach; their glory is in their shame; and they are focused on earthly things.**

### **VERSES 15-16**

Paul expected the believers in Philippi to follow his example. Those who were *mature* in their faith would understand that they were not perfect and would be motivated toward sanctification. Rather than trusting their own strength, they would reject the legalists and rely completely on the work of Christ.

Just as children mature at different rates, some believers are slower to mature in their faith. A spirit of pride may have taken root among some Philippians. Regardless of what caused the immature

attitudes, Paul noted that some might think differently, probably because of the influence of false teachers. But Paul was confident that **God will reveal** the truth to them. Paul did not diminish their faith or question their salvation. He simply trusted God to help these weaker believers grow up.

**What are the consequences of failing to grow in one's spiritual walk?  
What are the dangers of becoming comfortable with or feeling mature in our spiritual growth?**

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### VERSES 17-19

When it came to the Christian life, Paul was not shy about offering himself as a role model. He wasn't being arrogant or superior, and he also acknowledged others who deserved **careful attention**. But Jesus was Paul's example, so Paul was comfortable having others follow him. By **imitating** Paul, the Philippians would be striving to become more like Jesus. That would squash any controversy created by false teachers.

Paul had warned the Philippians about false teachers in the past. Now he was warning them again—even to the point of **tears**. He described these heretics as **enemies of the cross**. True discipleship requires the cross, so anyone who stood against sound doctrine was standing against Jesus and His cross.

Rather than hating his opponents, Paul grieved over their stubbornness. As a former enemy of the cross himself, he doubtlessly wished that they would turn from their sins. But he made it clear that these heretics were not simply confused; they were actively working against Christ and would suffer the consequences of their choices. Another reason Paul may have grieved over his enemies is that he understood where their lives were heading: **destruction**. If they did not accept Christ, they would experience eternal judgment.

Paul also noted that the false teachers were controlled by physical urges rather than spiritual discernment. He said their **stomach** was their god—not their literal bellies but the earthly desires that held them captive. This could include the excesses of the Romans and Greeks or the stringent efforts of Jews. Either way, any desire that denies Christ is wrong.

In addition, they took pride in what should have brought them **shame**. If these false teachers were Jewish, this could refer to their public obsession with the private act of circumcision. While Paul and other mature Christians were following a heavenly call, they were **focused on earthly things**. They trusted their own accomplishments and good deeds to secure a relationship with God.

## **CITIZENSHIP ASSURED** (PHIL. 3:20-21)

**<sup>20</sup> Our citizenship is in heaven, and we eagerly wait for a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>21</sup> He will transform the body of our humble condition into the likeness of his glorious body, by the power that enables him to subject everything to himself.**

### **VERSES 20-21**

In contrast to the enemies of the cross who were fascinated with this world, the Christians in Philippi held that their true **citizenship is in heaven**. Philippi held special status as a colony of the Roman Empire, so the Philippians held special status as Roman citizens living outside Rome. But this earthly citizenship did not compare to their eternal citizenship with Christ.

As heavenly citizens, they were called to **eagerly wait for a Savior** coming from heaven. While the Philippians should honor the Emperor as their human leader, their ultimate loyalty—like their ultimate citizenship—belonged to heaven.

When Jesus returns, everything will change. Christ will **transform** our earthly bodies into heavenly bodies. We will not only be *with* Jesus, but we will also become *like* Jesus. He has the power to accomplish this because everything is under His authority.

At His return, He will **subject everything to himself** once and for all. The Philippians' idea of power may have centered on Rome. Jesus' power didn't depend on military might. His authority was rooted in His resurrection—something no human leader could replicate.

**Paul said believers should eagerly wait for Jesus' return. How can you become more eager in your anticipation?**

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# APPLY THE TEXT

- Faith in Christ is the only way to gain a right standing before God.
- Faith in Christ opens the door for ongoing spiritual sanctification.
- Believers must remain faithful in their commitment to Christ.
- The promise of heaven should motivate believers to remain faithful to Christ.

**Record three goals you have for your spiritual growth. What are some practical things you can do to “know” Jesus more passionately in the next three months?**

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**How do you and the members of your Bible study encourage one another in spiritual growth? What needs to be added to the regular group time to foster spiritual growth to a greater degree?**

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**Consider the impact your life has on others, noting who may be watching you as an example. What adjustments might you need to consider in light of others looking to you to show them how to live the Christian life?**

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## PRAYER NEEDS

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# *Joy Through Peace*

Believers find joyous peace through Christ even in the midst of turmoil.

## PHILIPPIANS 4:1-9

Imagine these two scenes. The first is of a mountain lake away from all the hustle and bustle. The motionless water acts like a mirror, reflecting the beauty and quiet of the moment. In the second scene, a bird calmly sits on her nest built in a small opening in a rock. Her nest is hidden by a raging waterfall with a storm approaching in the horizon. In both scenes, we find peace. God is present in both the still moments and the storms. Paul reminded the Philippians that peace was found in God's presence regardless of the circumstances.

**If you were asked to illustrate peace with a photo or painting, where would you begin? How do your life experiences impact how you understand peace?**

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# UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

## **PHILIPPIANS 4:1-9**

Physically, the Philippian believers were citizens of Philippi and of Rome, but their ultimate home was with God in heaven (Phil. 3:20-21). Their heavenly citizenship should influence every word, attitude, and action during their time on earth.

Because their permanent address was in heaven, they should not hesitate to stand firm for God in this life (4:1). By living out their firm commitment, they would reflect God to the world and point others toward salvation in Christ. The alternative would be conflict and dissension. Paul called out two members of the Philippian congregation in hopes of nurturing reconciliation between them and within the entire congregation (4:2-3).

Instead of divisions, Paul challenged the Philippians to focus on joy. He had already expressed the great joy he experienced when he remembered his friends in Philippi (1:3-6), but this joy was different. It was a joy shaped by persecution and suffering.

Paul was living under house arrest as a prisoner of Rome. While he was confident God was going to release him to continue ministering, he had no guarantees. No doubt, Paul experienced human emotions and questions. But ultimately he was able to keep his focus on joy because he knew that he was in God's hands and could bring his concerns to His throne anytime he wanted.

Paul wanted his readers to know that they could experience such joy and peace as well. By releasing their worries and concerns, the Philippians would be able to see past their circumstances to the work God was doing in their lives. The Philippians could also embrace joy by keeping their focus on the things of God instead of on the things of the world (Phil. 4:8-9).

**Read Philippians 4:1-9 in your Bible. How do the actions Paul listed demonstrate confidence in God and His presence ?**

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# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## STAND (PHIL. 4:1)

**<sup>1</sup> So then, my dearly loved and longed for brothers and sisters, my joy and crown, in this manner stand firm in the Lord, dear friends.**

### VERSE 1

Paul revealed his heart for the Philippians. They were *dearly loved and longed for*. Thinking about the day he would proudly present his spiritual children to Christ, Paul considered them his *joy and crown*—proof of his own faithful service for the kingdom. He also called them *dear friends*, a recognition of their shared relationship in Christ.

Within these expressions of love, he also held out the challenge to *stand firm in the Lord*. Believers never “win” in their own strength. We have to lean into the power of Christ as we face attacks of false teachers from outside the body and the dangers of divisions inside the body.

**What are some obstacles that keep people from standing firm in the Lord? How does the faithfulness of a believer impact the lives of others?**

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## UNITE (PHIL. 4:2-3)

**<sup>2</sup> I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to agree in the Lord. <sup>3</sup> Yes, I also ask you, true partner, to help these women who have contended for the gospel at my side, along with Clement and the rest of my coworkers whose names are in the book of life.**

### VERSES 2-3

Relationships and congregations can be torn apart when believers take sides against one another. Paul saw that beginning to happen in Philippi, so he urged the parties involved to resolve their differences peaceably. The central characters were two women named *•Euodia* and *•Syntyche*, though the apostle gave no hint as to the nature of the dispute. In truth, the source of the conflict was not as important as the negative impact it was having on other believers.

Paul called them out. Instead of fighting one another, he urged them to ***agree in the Lord***. He begged them to find a mutual solution that would lead toward harmony in the church.

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### **KEY DOCTRINE: *Cooperation***

Members of New Testament churches should cooperate with one another in carrying forward the missionary, educational, and benevolent ministries for the extension of Christ's Kingdom. (See 1 Cor. 1:10-17.)

Because Paul was in Rome, he could not physically moderate the dispute. So he called on leaders of the church to step up. One individual, whom he addressed as a ***true partner***, was given the specific responsibility of mediating peace between the two women.

Disagreements are a natural result of the human condition. But Christians should never allow conflict to derail the church from her mission. Thankfully, Euodia and Syntyche had a history that extended beyond their arguments. Before contending with each other, Paul pointed out that they had ***contended for the gospel***. They had been a great help to Paul himself and had worked with ***Clement***—about whom nothing else is known—and many others ***whose names are in the book of life***.

**Why do disagreements left unaddressed lead to bigger issues?**

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### **PRAY** (PHIL. 4:4-7)

**<sup>4</sup> Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! <sup>5</sup> Let your graciousness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup> Don't worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.**

#### VERSE 4

As Paul challenged the Philippians to avoid conflicts and needless disputes, he recognized that something had to fill that gap in their lives. His response was simple: joy.

Surrounded by soldiers and living under house arrest, Paul challenged the Philippians to **rejoice**. This kind of joy doesn't come naturally. It's rooted in a supernatural dependence on Christ. That's why Paul emphasized rejoicing **in the Lord**. Just as Christ never changes, our joy can withstand any circumstances. **Always** reminds readers that circumstances and situations don't define our joy.

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#### DID YOU KNOW?

The word *joy* is found over 150 times in the Bible. If the related words “joyful” and “joyous” are included, the number is over 200. The verb “rejoice” appears in the Bible over 200 times.

#### VERSE 5

Paul wanted the Philippians to display **graciousness**—the external demonstration of God's internal work. The term can also be translated “gentleness” or “kindness” and includes the ideas of openness and fairness. Instead of harshly demanding their own rights or dogmatically judging others, Paul told his readers to reflect the grace of Christ.

This peaceful approach was possible because the **Lord is near**. This phrase could carry two different, but related, ideas. First, Jesus stands near His people. Even in the darkest times, believers can cling to the promises that He is always with us and that He will never leave us or forsake us (Matt. 28:16-20; Heb. 13:5). But Paul also could have been writing from an eternal perspective. One day, Jesus will come back to judge our actions according to His example. So, while His return should bring a sense of peace to believers, it should also produce a desire to uphold His character each day.

#### VERSES 6-7

Christians should refuse to **worry about anything**. Worry reveals a distinct lack of trust, suggesting that we don't believe God can

really meet our needs as He promised. Thankfully, God has given us a healthy way to deal with anxieties: prayer. Worry rarely solves anything, while prayer accomplishes much. (See Matt. 6:25-34.) The apostle encouraged his readers, **present your requests to God**. Christians should never hesitate to share their worries or concerns with their Father. He wants us to bring our fears and failures directly to Him because He cares deeply about us (1 Pet. 5:7).

God is never caught by surprise by our anxieties, but He wants us to talk to Him about them. When we pray, we aren't informing God of something new. We're acknowledging our dependence on Him to calm our storms and resolve our issues.

Paul also highlighted the importance of **thanksgiving**. Thanksgiving is both an appropriate context for our prayers and an appropriate response to His answers.

The end result of prayer is peace—not just any peace, but a peace that **surpasses all understanding**. The Greek wording points to a peace that transcends human logic or excels anything we could imagine. From a human perspective, it might seem like we are in over our heads. But from God's perspective, everything is under control. While we may not understand it all, we can live with peace instead of being paralyzed by fear.

Paul used a military term to explain the power behind this peace. His peace will **guard your hearts and minds**. Like a garrison of vigilant soldiers surrounding a city, Jesus' peace stands as a sentry to protect us against the lies of the enemy. Instead of fear and worry, God covers us with an umbrella of His security.

**What keeps people from approaching God with their needs?**

**How does prayer change a person's perspective about a situation?**

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**DWELL** (PHIL. 4:8-9)

**<sup>8</sup> Finally brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable—if there is any moral excellence and if there is anything praiseworthy—dwell on these things. <sup>9</sup> Do what**

**you have learned and received and heard from me, and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.**

### VERSE 8

Paul reminded the Philippians of their personal responsibility. After all, right thinking generally leads to right acting, and the overall unity within the church depends on the integrity of individuals. So, as **brothers and sisters**, they had an obligation to keep their focus on the things that would draw them closer to God.

To emphasize his point, Paul identified several hallmarks of the Christian's thought life. The first involved **whatever is true**. Jesus is the truth (John 14:6), and dishonesty runs contrary to everything He is about. His people should be guided by truth as their ethical foundation. This reflects His character to the world.

Paul also highlighted what is **honorable** and **just**. God created humans to live with a nobility that embraces the majestic and rejects anything undignified. As Christ followers, we should behave in ways that earn respect, not sneers. Likewise, we are called to defend what is right and fair because we serve a God who is right and fair.

**Pure, lovely, and commendable** each point to a believer's efforts to remain unstained by the world. Purity implies pursuing holiness and rejecting sin. Meanwhile, loveliness relates to beauty, specifically behavior that attracts others and inspires genuine acts of love. *Commendable* thoughts are admirable and readily approved. They draw people together instead of creating divisions.

In a culture that often celebrates debased attitudes and activities, Christians follow a different standard. Paul summarized this divine standard (including the qualities above) with two terms: **moral excellence** and **praiseworthy**. The first validates the substance of Christian ethics, while the second affirms the general acceptance of these virtues in both heaven and on earth. Together, they strengthen the faith of individuals and bring unity to congregations—all for the glory of God.

### VERSE 9

After providing a list of Christian hallmarks, Paul challenged the Philippians to put them into action. He called them to **do**—to move beyond head knowledge to practical application. Instead of discussing

or debating the relative merit of each virtue, his readers should start leaning into the Spirit's power and producing spiritual fruit.

Paul was never afraid to point to himself as an example. That's because he worked hard to make sure his walk matched his talk. Here, he reminded the Philippians of the principles they had **learned and received and heard** from him. These were not foreign concepts to his readers. He had invested time teaching the Philippians about what God expected. This was important at a time when the canon of Scripture was passed on orally. The Philippians had also **seen** Paul live out these principles in the flesh. His example was free from any trace of hypocrisy.

By disciplining their thought lives, Christians can create a sense of order that elevates Christ in front of a world struggling through chaos. This is what a life connected to **the God of peace** looks like.

### **How do the things we choose to give attention and thought impact our actions and sense of peace?**

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#### **BIBLE SKILL: *Review the use of a word.***

Paul used the word translated *rejoice* six times in his letter to the Philippians: 1:18; 2:17; 2:18,28; 3:1; and 4:4. Review these six passages, noting the nature and the source of the rejoicing. What common themes do you see in these six passages related to rejoicing? How does each passage give us a different view of the same action?

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# APPLY THE TEXT

- Standing firm brings joy to other believers.
- Believers need to be at peace with each other so they can help each other.
- Peace is found through prayer to God in all things.
- Believers find peace by focusing on the truth of the gospel.

**Are there other believers with whom you have a disagreement? What actions do you need to take to make sure that disagreement is addressed?**

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**Discuss with the Bible study group ways of encouraging each other through prayer. How can you and the members of your Bible study do a better job praying for and with one another?**

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**Review your thought life and patterns. How well do you reflect on and think about Scripture? What do you need to alter so that you spend more time thinking about things that are morally excellent and praiseworthy?**

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## PRAYER NEEDS

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# *Joy and Contentment*

Believers find joyous contentment in God's eternal presence.

## PHILIPPIANS 4:10-20

What picture comes to mind at the mention of contentment? We might picture a dog soaking in the sun while laying on green grass. Others might think of relaxing in a favorite recliner following a delicious meal. Still others might envision a healthy infant lying cozily in its mother's arms or cuddled in its crib. Most of us have this picture of contentment, but we somehow rarely see ourselves in that picture. Paul challenged the Philippians to pursue contentment. He wasn't promoting laziness or a lack of ambition. He was challenging them to find peace in Christ and joy in every situation.

**What are some "thieves" that steal a sense of contentment today?**

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# UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

## **PHILIPPIANS 4:10-23**

In Paul's mind, unity and joy went hand-in-hand. Without the bond of Christ holding believers together, genuine joy and peace simply wasn't possible. Conflict is always the enemy of contentment and satisfaction. That's why Paul was quick to address the dangers of division at work within the church of Philippi.

One prime example of the Philippians' lack of unity was the dispute between two women in the congregation: Euodia and Syntyche (4:2-3). Paul's words to them remind contemporary readers that while conflicts are real—even in the church—Christians should serve as agents of peace and unity.

Paul used the lesson on peace to springboard into another common theme of his letter: joy (vv. 4-5). He challenged his readers to find their joy in the Lord by paying close attention to what went on in their minds. If they allowed themselves to be overwhelmed by worry, the Philippians would never experience joy as God intended.

The remedy for worry was two-fold. First, believers should take their concerns directly to God in prayer (vv. 6-7). Second, they should keep their focus on things that will bring them closer to God (vv. 8-9). In this way, they would discover God's peace. And by guarding their minds, they would experience God's presence.

As he moved toward the close of his letter, Paul challenged the Philippians to focus on living with contentment (vv. 10-23). Contentment is defined by our relationship with Christ. So, whether our circumstances are up or down, Christians can still experience contentment through Jesus.

Paul tried to model contentment every day. He appreciated the gifts he received from the Philippians and others, but His ultimate source of help was Christ. As a result, he was able to thank God for the givers even more than for the gift. He wanted the same for his friends in Philippi.

**Read Philippians 4:10-20. How does God's presence produce contentment?**

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# EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

## IN ALL SITUATIONS (PHIL. 4:10-14)

<sup>10</sup> I rejoiced in the Lord greatly because once again you renewed your care for me. You were, in fact, concerned about me but lacked the opportunity to show it. <sup>11</sup> I don't say this out of need, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I find myself.

<sup>12</sup> I know how to make do with little, and I know how to make do with a lot. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being content — whether well fed or hungry, whether in abundance or in need. <sup>13</sup> I am able to do all things through him who strengthens me. <sup>14</sup> Still, you did well by partnering with me in my hardship.

### VERSES 10-11

Paul had already challenged the Philippians to rejoice (v. 4). Joy is a recurring theme in the letter. Paul **rejoiced** because the Philippians had **renewed** their care for him. They had never stopped caring for Paul and acted in a tangible way when they discovered his true circumstances.

This tangible support most notably came in a financial gift delivered by Epaphroditus. In general, Paul refused financial support for his missionary work. He always wanted to remove additional burdens from those he helped, and he wanted to debunk claims that he ministered only for the money.

Paul emphasized their generosity and the fact that they had **lacked the opportunity** to demonstrate it earlier. Readers are not told why the Philippians were delayed, but Paul clearly appreciated the reestablished connection with his friends.

Ultimately, Paul recognized God as the source of his contentment. The Philippians were God's instruments, but Paul's trust ultimately rested in Christ. The apostle never spoke **out of need** because he knew God was in control and providing for him. That allowed him to be **content in whatever circumstances** he faced.

### VERSES 12-13

Paul knew how to **make do with little**, and how to **make do with a lot**. He could be hungry or eating his fill. He could have plenty or little.

Paul had been through all of those circumstances, and they only deepened his commitment to the Savior. He could survive—and even thrive—in any setting because His contentment rested in his relationship with God through Christ, not material possessions.

Instead of worrying about the present or the future, he knew that he could **do all things** through Jesus. Paul knew his strength was not the result of his own actions. His faith was anchored in Christ (the “him” in v. 13), who had all the strength Paul would ever need.

Many Christians quote verse 13 as a confession of their dependence on God without considering the context. They interpret it as a universal promise. In truth, contentment in the face of suffering provides a vivid backdrop for God’s demonstration of strength. Paul certainly believed in a mighty God but would never water down the importance of suffering in experiencing that strength. Moreover, *all things* likely refers to the entire list of circumstances—both positive and negative—in verses 11-12.

**What are the dangers of viewing God as a means out of a challenge as opposed to the source of strength when facing a challenge?**

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#### VERSE 14

Paul again praised the Philippians for being a part of God’s plan. He noted that they **did well by partnering** to meet his needs and to spread the gospel. The Greek wording here relates to the word for fellowship (*koinonia*) and pictures two people walking in the same direction.

What’s more, the Philippians’ fellowship joined them to his **hardship**. They were not simply casual acquaintances who stepped back when the heat was turned up. Rather, they were like family members who joined him in trials. Paul filtered his persecution through the lens of eternity. So, those who partnered with his hardship also shared in the eternal blessings it produced.

The Philippians’ example reminds contemporary readers that they also can be God’s hands and feet. By partnering with others, we become part of something bigger than ourselves. We have the opportunity to expand the gospel’s reach and see the kingdom grow.

## THROUGH OTHER BELIEVERS (PHIL. 4:15-18)

**<sup>15</sup> And you Philippians know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving except you alone. <sup>16</sup> For even in Thessalonica you sent gifts for my need several times. <sup>17</sup> Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that is increasing to your account. <sup>18</sup> But I have received everything in full, and I have an abundance. I am fully supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you provided—a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.**

### VERSES 15-17

Generosity is a hallmark of God's people. The Bible clearly states that anything we "own" really doesn't belong to us. God owns it all (Ps. 24:1) and gives us the responsibility to use it for His glory. When believers maintain this understanding of material things, generosity becomes much easier to practice.

The Philippians apparently understood this concept because they had a history of being generous toward Paul. He was the first person to bring the gospel to **•Macedonia**, beginning with Philippi (Acts 16). While they weren't the only ones to benefit from his ministry, they were the only ones who had partnered ***in the matter of giving and receiving***. What's more, Paul noted that their gifts were not one-time contributions. After his release from the Philippian jail, the members of the Philippian church continued to send gifts to meet his immediate needs.

The Philippians' generosity must have provided a special blessing for Paul, considering what he received from others on his journeys. While the gifts from Philippi followed him from town to town, enemies also followed him and tried to cause trouble (Acts 17:13). One brought comfort and encouragement; the other created headaches.

Few, if any, other congregations came to his aid. Even during his ministry ***in •Thessalonica***, the Philippians came through with gifts on multiple occasions. Thessalonica was the city Paul traveled to after being asked to leave Philippi. (See Acts 17:1.) Other churches missed out on the opportunity to be a tangible part of the gospel work that Paul was building.

Typically, Paul balanced appreciation for the gift with his absolute dependence on Christ. He did not ***seek the gift*** from the Philippians.

He never begged for their offerings or held his ministry to them over their heads. They gave willingly and voluntarily of their own accord, and he saw them as agents of God’s provision. Paul’s letter was, in part, a receipt for their gift that gave them credit for their investment.

Instead of focusing on financial gifts he received, Paul emphasized the spiritual blessings that the Philippians would experience. God never allows obedience and generosity to go unrewarded. As Jesus had noted, those who give receive a return that far exceeds the gift (Luke 6:38). Paul used a pair of financial terms to describe these benefits. The offerings of the Philippians represented **profit** that would be credited to their **account**.

To be clear, Paul was not promoting a “prosperity gospel” or a “name it and claim it” theology. God blesses generous givers because God blesses obedience. Also, Paul did not indicate that the rewards would be financial or even material. The Philippians were not giving to demand reimbursement. They gave out of love and faithfulness—which God never fails to honor.

## VERSE 18

Returning to the subject of God’s provision, Paul stated again that he had received **everything in full**. God didn’t make a down payment or spread the blessings out over time. Instead, He met every need as it arose. In fact, God overpaid since Paul enjoyed an **abundance** that comes from being **fully supplied**. This confession also underscores the fact that Paul was not trying to get more from his friends in Philippi.

In addition to financial terms, Paul also used language from the Old Testament to explain how God viewed the Philippians’ gift. Comparing their contribution to the offerings made by the ancient priests, Paul said the Philippians’ generosity had three qualities. First, it was **a fragrant offering**. This was a common way to describe an appropriate offering in the Old Testament.

Second, it was **an acceptable sacrifice**. Contemporary readers may recall the differences in attitude between Cain and Abel’s offerings in Genesis 4. Obedience demonstrates faith, which defines an acceptable offering. Also, the gift was **pleasing to God**. Again, readers may reflect on the similarities between the Philippians’ gift and Paul’s challenge to present a “living sacrifice” in Romans 12:1-2. One represents a physical sacrifice while the other is financial, but they are both rooted

in faith. Financial generosity is a sign of personal devotion and discipleship. One cannot truly give financially from the heart until the heart has already been surrendered to God.

**How are the needs of both the giver and the recipient met through the act of giving?**

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**KEY DOCTRINE: *Stewardship***

God is the source of all blessings, temporal and spiritual; all that we have and are we owe to Him. (See Mal. 3:8-12.)

**FOR HIS GLORY** (PHIL. 4:19-20)

**<sup>19</sup> And my God will supply all your needs according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. <sup>20</sup> Now to our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.**

**VERSE 19**

Generosity opens the door for **God** to meet a believer's needs. This was what Paul had experienced even during his imprisonment. It was what he wanted the Philippians to experience as well.

God's provision includes two main characteristics. First, He leaves nothing to chance. Paul said that God would **supply all your needs**. Earlier in the passage, Paul had confessed to receiving everything in full and enjoying abundance from God (v. 18). God never shortchanges those who actively work for the kingdom.

Second, God's provision is limitless. Paul reminded his readers about God's **riches in glory in Christ Jesus**. Since God owns all things, everything is available for His use. He can fill any gap, whether physical or spiritual. This is a privilege His people can receive. The Greek wording also indicates that God's resources are not just available, but they are appropriate for every circumstance.

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**BIBLE SKILL: *Reflect on and memorize a verse.***

Reflect on Philippians 4:19. Focus on each phrase and how that phrase impacts a person's contentment. Memorize the verse. Use the verse in your prayers this week. How does this verse summarize Paul's message to the Philippians?

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**VERSE 20**

As Paul thought about God's provision, He responded with an outpouring of praise. He turned his attention to ***our God and Father***, emphasizing the close relationship His children share with their Creator. He is powerful and utterly beyond our human understanding, and He is also close and available.

More importantly, He is worthy of ***glory forever and ever***. The Philippians were surrounded by idolatry and paganism. But Paul reminded them that only God was truly worthy of honor and praise. His doxology sheds a light on the future as well as the present, and it reminded readers that their ultimate purpose in life is tied to bringing glory to God.

The eternal language in verse 20 reflects the language of heaven in the Book of Revelation. (See Rev. 1:6; 4:9; 5:13; and 7:12.) In His model prayer, Jesus noted that the honor and glory accorded God in heaven should be replicated in the lives of His people on earth (Matt. 6:9). Paul understood that as God's people respond properly to His generous provision of their needs, He will be glorified, giving us a taste of heaven on earth.

**How does giving open the door for God to be honored? What safeguards could be put in place to make sure God is honored when we give?**

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# APPLY THE TEXT

- Christ provides contentment in all circumstances.
- Christ sometimes provides for a believer's needs through other faithful believers.
- Bringing glory to God is the believer's ultimate life purpose.

**Reflect on how God has provided for you during a challenging time. Who do you know that is facing a challenge right now? How can you encourage them from this passage and your experience?**

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**Discuss as a group ways your Bible study group can be more active in meeting the needs of others. How can the group be an agent in God's provision for someone else?**

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**Ask God to show you a need and a way to honor Him in meeting that need. What steps do you need to take to make sure you honor Him?**

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## PRAYER NEEDS

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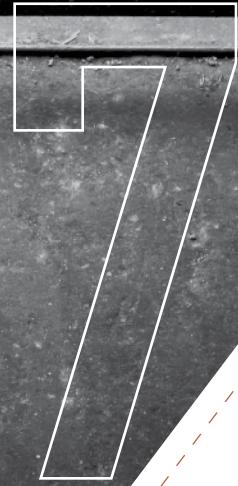
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# *The Gospel's Power*

The power of the gospel frees us from sin and Satan's control.

## COLOSSIANS 1:9-23

John Mitchell and Philip Weigel were sentenced to hang for treason. President George Washington twice stayed their executions before granting them a full pardon on November 2, 1795. Though guilty, Mitchell and Weigel were freed. That is the power of a pardon. The gospel also pardons us from our guilt. Through faith in Jesus, we gain eternal forgiveness for all our sin, being released from our sentence of eternal separation from God.

**How might receiving a pardon for a past wrong impact how a person lives after receiving that pardon?**

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# UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

## **COLOSSIANS 1:1-23**

Like his epistle to the Philippians, Paul's letter to the Colossians is considered a Prison Epistle. Paul likely wrote this letter while under house arrest in Rome. However, because the apostle did not specifically mention Rome in the text, other possibilities—such as Ephesus or Caesarea—have been suggested.

The city of Colossae was located in Lycus Valley of southern Asia Minor (modern Turkey), near Laodicea. While Colossae had been important when the Greeks ruled that region, its prominence had declined over time as the influence of other cities in the area grew. Since the city was known to be ethnically diverse, it is safe to assume that the congregation that received Paul's epistle was also diverse.

Although we have no record of Paul actually visiting Colossae, he still held a great deal of sway in Asia Minor. His work in Ephesus resonated across the region, and the Colossians likely came to Christ thanks to the efforts of Paul's friends. That connection gave Paul the freedom and authority to speak to the Colossians as if he had personally led them to Christ.

Specifically, the letter to the Colossians attacks false teachers who had infiltrated the church and raised questions about the nature of Jesus. In the first half of the epistle, Paul outlined a clear emphasis on the deity and person of Christ, highlighting His superiority in every realm. The hymn at the center of this lesson's passage (Col. 1:15-20) provides an example of this rich Christology. Meanwhile, the second half of the letter focuses on practical application, as Paul challenged the Colossian Christians to live out their relationship with Christ in tangible ways and to reveal Him to the surrounding culture.

**Read Colossians 1:9-23 in your Bible, circling words or phrases that describe Jesus. How do these words or phrases point to the power of the gospel?**

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# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## SET FREE (COL. 1:9-14)

<sup>9</sup> For this reason also, since the day we heard this, we haven't stopped praying for you. We are asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding, <sup>10</sup> so that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God, <sup>11</sup> being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, so that you may have great endurance and patience, joyfully <sup>12</sup> giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the saints' inheritance in the light. <sup>13</sup> He has rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son he loves. <sup>14</sup> In him we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

### VERSES 9-10

Paul never *stopped praying* for the Colossians because he understood that their faith was in danger. False teachers were at the door. Paul prayed for God to grant the Colossians the *knowledge of his will* and *wisdom and spiritual understanding*. The believers would need these benefits to protect themselves from false teaching.

The Colossian heretics believed that a special knowledge of God (revealed only to them) was the key to a deeper spirituality. But Paul's words emphasize that God has already made Himself known to humanity. He has already provided all the revelation and wisdom necessary to know and follow Him.

Armed with God's wisdom, the Colossian Christians could *walk worthy* of the Lord and their obedience would be *fully pleasing* to God. Such faithfulness would produce results. The Colossians would continue *bearing fruit in every good work*.

**What does walking worthy of the Lord look like? What role does a person's dependence on God play in walking in a worthy manner?**

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## VERSES 11-12

The Colossians' personal strength wasn't enough to face the challenges of a pagan world. Paul reminded them that through Christ they had access to God's **power**. God's **glorious might** surpasses anything we can imagine or describe. His strength anchors us to His presence, protecting us from the lies of false teachers.

Trusting God produces two vital internal qualities: **endurance and patience**. Patience involves standing up to opposition, while endurance implies moving forward despite that opposition. This tension is resolved by remembering that God is ultimately in control. Christians are called to a kind of active waiting that works **joyfully** while knowing the final result rests with God. Patient endurance produces **thanks to the Father**. His promise to sustain is true and reliable. When God carries us through our struggles, our response should be gratitude.

The Greek word translated **enabled** means God's work alone qualifies us for ministry. God is the Author of both our salvation and our ministry. He saved us in the past, supernaturally empowers us to serve in the present, and will reward us in eternity. At every stage, He deserves all the glory.

## VERSES 13-14

Paul pointed the Colossians to the foundation of their faith: the gospel. At one time, they had been slaves to the **domain of darkness**. They were helpless and hopeless. Jesus changed all that. When the Colossians embraced Christ as Savior, He transferred them to a new kingdom. Satan's authority fell by the wayside under the light of the **Son**.

**Redemption** was a common economic term in the ancient world and described buying freedom for those in bondage. Jesus paid the price for our sin through His death on the cross. He purchased us out of slavery. He also provided **forgiveness**, canceling our sin debt and rescuing us from its eternal consequences. Human knowledge and good works—two pillars of the Colossian heretics—could never make that happen.

## BY CHRIST (COL. 1:15-20)

**<sup>15</sup> He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. <sup>16</sup> For everything was created by him, in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through him**

and for him.<sup>17</sup> He is before all things, and by him all things hold together.<sup>18</sup> He is also the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.<sup>19</sup> For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him,<sup>20</sup> and through him to reconcile everything to himself, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

### VERSES 15-16

Paul highlighted the superiority of Christ, emphasizing two important facts about Jesus. First, He is the **image of the invisible God**. The Greek word *eikon* (image) was sometimes used to refer to a likeness placed on a coin or statue—something that corresponds to the original. Here it carries the idea of a manifestation. Jesus didn't just mirror God; He is God—and always has been. His taking on a human body offered a visible image of the invisible God.

Second, Paul called Jesus the **firstborn over all creation**. False teachers would twist this and claim that Jesus was only a created being—like the angels but more powerful. Paul was explaining that Jesus was first in priority, not just first in chronology. Instead of being part of creation, Jesus is superior to creation. He enjoys a unique relationship with the Father that nothing else in creation shares: equality.

Jesus was superior to creation for another reason: **Everything was created by him**. Like the Father and the Spirit, whose roles in creation are overtly described, Jesus was an active participant in the events of Genesis 1. (See also John 1:1-3.)

The false teachers seemed to focus on the spiritual world at the expense of the material world. Paul reminded the Colossians that God made it all. Paul used four pairs of words to clarify this point. **In heaven and on earth** demonstrates His power over angels and people. The **visible and the invisible** reminds readers that every spiritual being—angel or demon—is subject to Jesus. Likewise, the pairings of **thrones or dominions** and **rulers or authorities** could refer to human leaders, but Paul probably had spiritual agents in mind. Regardless of their nature, Jesus created **all things**. Not only were these things created *through* Jesus, they were also created **for him**. We exist for His pleasure and His purpose.

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## DID YOU KNOW?

Many Bible scholars consider Colossians 1:15-23 to be an early hymn reflecting the worship of the first-century church.

### VERSES 17-18

Paul noted that Jesus is ***before all things***, an acknowledgment that He existed before creation. He has always been. Jesus' eternal existence underscores His authority over all that came after Him.

Christ is not simply our Creator. He is also our Sustainer, making sure that ***all things hold together*** through His power. Deism is the belief that God created the world and then withdrew from it. In Colossians, Paul emphasized that Christ actively works within creation. From our mortal point of view, we identify certain laws of nature by which the universe operates and holds together. The underlying truth is that Christ stands behind these laws as the personal explanation for the regularity of the cosmos and thereby prevents it from becoming chaos.

### What are the implications of Jesus' being both the Creator and Sustainer of our world?

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Just as Jesus is sovereign over creation, He also stands sovereign over His church. Paul called Christ the ***head of the body***. The image implies both authority as ruler and guidance. Christians make up the body, with Christ the Head. Without Him, the body would cease to function. (See 1 Cor. 12:12-27.)

The ***beginning*** might remind readers of Jesus' claim to be Alpha in John's revelation (Rev. 1:8; 21:6). Everything starts and ends with Him, so everything exists under His authority. Along with being the firstborn of creation, Christ is also the ***firstborn from the dead***. His physical resurrection makes physical and spiritual resurrection possible for others.

Christ's victory over hell and the grave gave Him authority over life and death. As Paul told the Philippians, through God, Jesus

holds all authority and possesses the name that is above every name (Phil. 2:9-11). While others may attempt to usurp His position, Christ alone has first place in everything.

### VERSES 19-20

God *was pleased to have all his fullness dwell* in Jesus. In His incarnate body, Christ was not a lesser or diminished expression of God. When people saw Jesus, they were seeing God in the flesh.

Through Christ, God was able to *reconcile everything to himself*. The animal sacrifices that brought temporary redemption under the old covenant were replaced by the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ that opened the door wide for everyone in all times. The blood of Christ produced a lasting *peace* between heaven and earth. As Paul told the Romans, all of creation suffers from the devastating effects of sin (Rom. 8:22). But through Jesus' death on the cross, nature itself experienced a promise of renewal.

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### KEY DOCTRINE: *Salvation (Justification)*

Justification brings the believer unto a relationship of peace and favor with God. (See Gal. 3:24.)

### THROUGH HIS DEATH (COL. 1:21-23)

**<sup>21</sup> Once you were alienated and hostile in your minds as expressed in your evil actions. <sup>22</sup> But now he has reconciled you by his physical body through his death, to present you holy, faultless, and blameless before him—<sup>23</sup> if indeed you remain grounded and steadfast in the faith and are not shifted away from the hope of the gospel that you heard. This gospel has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and I, Paul, have become a servant of it.**

### VERSES 21-23

Before salvation, the Colossian believers were *alienated* from God. They were *hostile* toward Him and His ways. Twisted *minds* lead to twisted behavior, and the Colossians' clouded thinking led to *evil actions*. Without a moral compass, they felt free to do whatever

seemed good at the time. Unfortunately, that freedom only led them deeper into the bondage of sin.

Jesus' death and resurrection changed everything. On the cross, Christ **reconciled** sinners back to God. When Jesus brings His people into God's presence, they won't enter as defeated rebels. They will come as full members of the family, with all the privileges and qualities of God's family. Paul used three words that illustrate this truth. We will be **holy**, separated from the world. We will be **faultless** because all our sins are forgiven and forgotten under the blood of Jesus. And we will be **blameless**—perfected through the righteousness of God's Son.

Paul emphasized that the false teachers would try to move the Colossian believers off the foundation of the gospel. He challenged them to **remain grounded and steadfast** in their faith. The word **if** in verse 23 means "since," making it a statement of conviction and not doubt. For the Colossians, the gospel was an anchor and hope even in the face of false teaching and in a culture hostile toward God and His truth. Once we accept Christ, we stand secure in the unchanging power of God's good news.

**How does knowing a believer is reconciled through faith in Jesus help that person remain faithful to living out a God-honoring life?**

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**BIBLE SKILL:** *Create a chart.*

Divide a sheet of paper into two columns. Head one column "Person" and the other "Work." Sift carefully through Colossians 1:9-20 and list aspects of both Christ's Person (who Christ is) and His work (what Christ does). How is Jesus' person (identity) seen in His work? How does His identity make it possible for Jesus to do the work listed?

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# APPLY THE TEXT

- Christ enables believers to live a God-honoring life.
- Christ has the power to free us from sin.
- Christ's death makes it possible for people to be reconciled to God.

**Discuss as a group challenges to living a God-honoring life in today's world. How can the group help individuals face those challenges?**

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**Reflect on your life prior to faith in Jesus and your life after expressing faith in Jesus. With whom can you share your story?**

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**How can you make the most of your reconciliation with God through Jesus? What blessings and benefits can you start making a part of your life?**

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## PRAYER NEEDS

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# *The Gospel's Goal*

Spiritual transformation is the goal of the gospel.

## COLOSSIANS 1:24–2:3

October marks the end of major league baseball season with the World Series in view. Every team began with the hope of playing in that final series. Players had goals for themselves that would contribute to the overall goal of making it to the World Series. The common goal of winning a championship brings together a group of people and makes them a team. Spiritually, every believer should strive for a common goal: maturity. God wants us to become more like Him; it's a goal He can help us reach.

**What are some qualities of a winning sports team? How do those qualities translate into the Christian life?**

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# UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

## **COLOSSIANS 1:24–2:3**

The Colossians were under attack. The congregation was being introduced to new ideas about who Jesus was and the keys to spiritual maturity. Smooth-talking heretics had slipped into the crowd and shared “truths” that weren’t true at all.

Even though Paul was under house arrest in Rome, he refused to let false teachers take over the Colossian congregation. Though he probably had never met the Colossian Christians, he wrote a letter to remind them of the foundational truths of the gospel.

After a brief introduction, Paul jumped into the most essential truth of all—the person of Jesus Christ. While the false teachers said that Jesus had been a good man, they denied that He really was God. They believed He was among God’s highest creations but was created nonetheless.

For Paul, there was no room for doubt or skepticism. Jesus had proven that He is God and that He is the central figure in the gospel story. This was the truth that had led the Colossians into a personal relationship with God through Jesus, and this was the truth that Paul urged them to continue embracing.

Paul cared about these distant believers because he was a faithful minister of the gospel. He had suffered for the message of Christ and had dedicated his life to making sure that as many people as possible heard about Him. He longed to see believers grow in the faith and to become more like Jesus each day (Col. 1:24–2:3).

In contrast, the false teachers were threatening the spiritual health and growth of the Colossians. They were trying to take people captive through lies and deceptions (2:4-8). Repeating the truths about who Jesus is and what He did was the only way to derail the heretics’ mission.

**Read Colossians 1:24–2:3 and note the occurrences of the word “mystery.” How does the revealing of the mystery of Jesus produce spiritual growth?**

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# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## COMMITTED AS A MESSENGER (COL. 1:24-27)

**<sup>24</sup> Now I rejoice in my sufferings for you, and I am completing in my flesh what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for his body, that is, the church. <sup>25</sup> I have become its servant, according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, <sup>26</sup> the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. <sup>27</sup> God wanted to make known among the Gentiles the glorious wealth of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.**

### VERSE 24

From his earliest days as a believer, Paul had experienced the dangers of taking a stand for the gospel. Jews were offended because the gospel included the Gentiles, and the Gentiles were threatened because the gospel diminished their pagan traditions. Still, the apostle stood strong. Even as he wrote this letter to the Colossians, he was living under house arrest in Rome.

Paul did not take persecution personally. He knew he was being abused for the sake of Christ. He also understood he could **rejoice** in his **sufferings** because they had a positive impact on others. Through his pain, he was blessing **the church**. He depended on the Savior more and more as he endured the struggles. His suffering also encouraged others to take a bolder stand for Christ. (See Phil. 1:12-14.)

The key question in this passage is what Paul meant by completing **what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for his body**. At first glance, it might seem that he meant the sufferings of Christ were not sufficient for the salvation of the lost, and that Paul's sufferings had somehow made up a lack in Christ's redeeming work. However, Paul had just declared that through the blood of His cross, Christ achieved God's good pleasure of reconciling everything to Himself by making peace. (See 1:20.) We can eliminate any idea that Paul meant that his own sufferings had redeeming value. His afflictions were not for supplying some lack in salvation's provision but were for advancing the outreach of the gospel and growth of the church.

It is quite possible Paul recognized that not every genuinely redeemed individual was willing to suffer for the sake of spreading the gospel and growing the church. Thus, there was a deficiency in the amount of suffering others had been willing to undergo in order to bring the saving message of the gospel to all people in all places. Paul determined he would go the second mile in risking his life to reduce that deficit by willingly suffering more than the average in the work of missionary outreach.

**How does a person's willingness to endure any challenge for the sake of the gospel impact those who hear the gospel as a result of that challenge?**

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### VERSES 25-27

Paul recognized he was a **servant** of the church, working under **God's commission**. He knew that everything he said and did had an impact on those under his care. So he wanted to be faithful to the charge the Lord had given him, even if it included suffering.

Primarily, that charge was to **make the word of God fully known**. Paul's challenge was to share the truth of the gospel in every setting so every person would get the complete picture of what it means to follow Christ. He compared the gospel to a **mystery hidden for ages**. In the ancient world, a *mystery* represented a secret that is kept until an appointed time. In Colossae, the heretics insisted that only the possession of some secret wisdom could unite a believer with God. Paul was emphasizing something God had first planted in the text of the Old Testament and revealed through the gospel: salvation through Jesus Christ. God had made a way for humanity to be restored to Him.

God initially revealed His plan to His chosen people, the Jews. While they tended to expect special privileges in God's kingdom as a result, His offer of salvation is for all people. In other words, **the Gentiles** were part of God's plan from the beginning. God wanted them in on the mystery. That's what Paul's commission was all about.

Paul reminded the Colossians that Christ had lived **in you** since the day they accepted His offer of salvation. He had walked with them every step of the way and would never leave. The assurance of Christ's presence would ignite the **hope of glory** in their lives. Hope points to

the future, and Christ provided a solid foundation for believing there was more to this life than what the Colossians could see at the time. Because Jesus was a part of their day-to-day lives, these Gentiles never had to wonder how things would end up. Through faith, the best was yet to come.

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**BIBLE SKILL:** *Look up cross-references for clarity.*

Paul used the words “sufferings” (Col. 1:24) and “struggling” (Col. 2:1) to describe his missionary work. Review 2 Corinthians 11:23-33 and look up cross references identified in a study Bible. How do these verses affirm Paul’s description of his work in Colossians 1–2? How do his experiences emphasize his dependence on God in doing this work?

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**FOCUSED ON MATURITY** (COL. 1:28-29)

**<sup>28</sup> We proclaim him, warning and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. <sup>29</sup> I labor for this, striving with his strength that works powerfully in me.**

**VERSES 28-29**

For Paul, the gospel wasn’t about keeping a set of rules and regulations; it was about Jesus. The apostle was determined to **proclaim** Him. His message included both **warning** and **teaching**. The first term implies a confrontation designed to correct wrong actions or thinking. The second refers to laying out the foundational truths of God in a way that is easy to understand and elicits a positive response. Warnings focus on what must be rejected, while teaching highlights what should be embraced. Both are necessary in the Christian life.

**Wisdom** means seeing things from God’s perspective and acting according to His plan. The presence of the false teachers made God’s wisdom even more important for the Colossians in their context.

The result of warning and teaching in wisdom is spiritual growth. Paul longed for the Colossians to become **mature in Christ**. Helping believers become more like Jesus wasn’t a passing interest for Paul; it was what his life was all about. He used the words **labor** and **striving** to convey the intensity he exerted in his ministry. The Greek wording indicates an athlete enduring pain and agonizing to the point of exhaustion to reach a goal. God placed this all-encompassing commission on the apostle’s life, and Paul responded by devoting every fiber of his being to fulfilling that call.

Paul also acknowledged that it was not about him; it was all about Jesus. Paul could put in the long hours and endure the persecutions, but it would be worthless unless he was plugged into Christ and trusting in **his strength**. The idea here is that the apostle drew his energy from the supernatural power of Christ working **powerfully** through his life.

**How does the gospel empower a person to share the truth about Jesus?  
What are the consequences of delivering a message in our own strength?**

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### **KEY DOCTRINE: *Evangelism and Missions***

It is the duty and privilege of every follower of Christ and of every church of the Lord Jesus Christ to endeavor to make disciples of all nations. (See Matt. 28:18-20.)

### **CONCERNED FOR THE FAITHFUL (COL. 2:1-3)**

**<sup>1</sup> For I want you to know how greatly I am struggling for you, for those in Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me in person.**

**<sup>2</sup> I want their hearts to be encouraged and joined together in love, so that they may have all the riches of complete understanding**

**and have the knowledge of God’s mystery—Christ. <sup>3</sup> In him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.**

### VERSES 1-3

Having shared his overall passion for Christian maturity, Paul focused specifically on the believers in Colossae. He wasn’t just **struggling** for Christians in a larger sense. He was also pouring himself out for the Colossian congregation. This compassion is what led him to write to them in the first place.

While Paul was living under house arrest in Rome, his struggles were internal, not external. The persecutions he was facing did not measure up to the concerns he shared for the wellbeing of his readers. He knew the damage false teaching could do, and this created turbulence in his spirit. He was spiritually wrestling with the enemy on behalf of the believers in Colossae.

Paul mentioned the believers in **•Laodicea** as another group on his heart. This probably indicates that the false teachers had expanded their influence outside Colossae.

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### DID YOU KNOW?

The city of Laodicea was located about ten miles from Colossae. Paul wrote a letter to the Laodiceans around the same time he wrote the Colossians and asked that the two congregations swap letters so each one could know what he said to the other (Col. 4:15-16). Laodicea later developed an infamous reputation because of Jesus’ criticism in the Book of Revelation (Rev. 3:14-22).

The Colossians and the Laodiceans represented believers Paul had never seen **in person**. But that fact did not diminish his hopes and dreams for them as Christians. He still cared about them and wanted them to know Christ better each day. Therefore, he reached out to them and challenged them to mature in their faith—even in the face of false teaching.

**How is Paul’s concern a demonstration of his maturity? Does a believer’s concern for others serve as an indicator of spiritual maturity? Explain.**

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Spiritual maturity doesn’t just happen; it is nurtured. Paul wanted to play a role in the Colossians’ development as believers. He longed for them to be **encouraged** in the truth of the gospel. The Greek word conveys the idea of strength to stand up for what is right. It also refers to something required at that moment. The Colossians needed help to stand strong in the face of meddling false teachers.

### ***Growing as a Christian means growing closer to Christ.***

Paul’s explanation for desiring the congregation’s encouragement and unity was that they might possess all the **riches** of **understanding** and **knowledge** that are in Christ. The activity of the false teachers was the impetus behind Paul’s desire. Some false teachers made much of their supposed secrets and hidden wisdom, supposing themselves to have a higher knowledge than that possessed by ordinary Christians. In opposition to such a supposition was Paul’s understanding that all a believer needs to understand and know is found in Christ. Jesus is the “storehouse” for God’s good gifts. We receive them as we come to Him in faith.

Growing as a Christian means growing closer to Christ. The mysteries promised by the false teachers couldn’t provide that kind of fellowship or security. Their secrets only led to more bondage, while the gospel sets people free.

The Father has given believers everything they need to know Him more intimately through the work of the Son. **All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge** are available through Christ. He holds nothing back, so we lack nothing. We need to put our trust in Him and allow Him to teach us how to become more like Him.

# APPLY THE TEXT

- God works through the lives of His followers to make the gospel known.
- Believers deliver God’s message in His strength so others can grow spiritually.
- Believers demonstrate maturity by encouraging faithfulness in others.

**To whom are you being sent to share the gospel? To what lengths are you willing to go to complete that task? What is your next step in sharing with that person or group?**

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**Evaluate your level of trust in God in delivering the gospel to others. In what areas do you need to depend upon God more fully?**

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**Discuss as a group ways of encouraging others to grow spiritually. How can the group show a greater concern for all people?**

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## PRAYER NEEDS

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# *The Gospel's Forgiveness*

Forgiveness of sin is found only through faith in Jesus.

## **COLOSSIANS 2:4-15**

When Spanish sailors discovered the Galapagos Islands, they found so many giant tortoises that they named the islands after them. (*Galapago* is Spanish for “tortoise.”) Except for a few zoos, the islands are the only place these animals live. We can find them only if we are looking in the right place. In spiritual terms, God’s forgiveness works the same way. God makes it abundantly available, but we must be looking in the right place. More specifically, we must be looking to the right person—Jesus.

**How do people try to deal with their sin apart from Jesus?**

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# UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

## **COLOSSIANS 2:4-15**

The second chapter of Colossians opens with Paul expressing his anxious concern for the Colossian believers. He referred to that concern as a great struggle, likely, indicating the intensity of his ongoing prayers for them. To his concern for the church, he added his intense desire for their encouragement and unity, as well as their understanding of the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden in Christ.

This week's passage opens with his statement of the reason for his anxious concern: He did not want them to be deceived by false teachings. He had become aware of false teachers who were seeking to deceive the Colossian believers with fine-sounding reasoning and impressive rhetoric. The efforts of the false teachers in their midst were aimed at leading the members away from their first love for Christ and their convictions about His person and work. Paul directed them to continue to follow Christ with gratitude, just as they had been taught from the beginning. Even though not physically present with them, Paul assured them that he was with them in spirit and deep concern. Believers then and now are to remain faithful to Christ and true to His gospel.

Paul's challenge to the Colossians to carefully evaluate what they believed focused on two main points. First, he called them to embrace the faith that had been delivered to them—faith that relied on Christ alone for a relationship with the Father (Col. 2:6-7). Second, he urged them to reject the false teachers who promoted other ideas and options (2:8-15). By emphasizing these truths, Paul reminded the Colossians of the absolute sufficiency of Christ's work on their behalf. The heretics might rely on special knowledge or legalistic rituals, but nothing they offered could provide what only Jesus freely offered.

**Read Colossians 2:4-15 and underline what faith in Jesus provides. How is faith in Jesus alone superior to all other teachings and philosophies about life?**

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# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## CONTINUE (COL. 2:4-7)

**<sup>4</sup> I am saying this so that no one will deceive you with arguments that sound reasonable. <sup>5</sup> For I may be absent in body, but I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see how well ordered you are and the strength of your faith in Christ. <sup>6</sup> So then, just as you have received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to walk in him, <sup>7</sup> being rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, and overflowing with gratitude.**

### VERSES 4-5

Paul understood that the false teachers' ultimate goal was to **deceive** the Colossians. Because their teaching had no real spiritual substance to offer, they relied on the power of persuasion to fool the Colossians. To this end, they had developed a system of **arguments that sound reasonable**. The false teachers weren't trying to pull the Colossians away from orthodoxy with a sudden jerk. Instead, they mixed truth and error, using just enough Christian vocabulary to appear legitimate.

The heretics had daily access to the Colossian congregation, putting Paul at a disadvantage. He was **absent in body**, imprisoned in Rome with no immediate hope of confronting the troublemakers in person. Despite his physical separation, Paul reminded the Colossians he was with them **in spirit**. As an apostle, he had power and authority that the false teachers could never hope to achieve.

Even from a distance, Paul could discern the true condition of the Colossian church. He recognized that they were **well ordered**. This was probably a military term that described a camp that was organized and defended well. The Colossians' faith had held up under pressure, and they refused to scatter when attacked. They had demonstrated the **strength** of their faith in Christ—a quality that Paul urged them to expand.

### VERSES 6-7

The Colossians had not simply learned nice doctrines. They had **received Christ Jesus** Himself. They had accepted Christ as their Savior and their **Lord**. Jesus needed to remain their focus. Since they were

making steady progress, Paul urged the Colossians to maintain their course. He encouraged them to **continue to walk** with Christ each day. The false teachers were tempting them to pursue a different path.

Christ gave the Colossians an anchor against the heretics' deceptions. Paul used three strong words to describe just how this anchor would keep them grounded in the gospel. First, they would be **rooted**. Strong trees stand up against storms when their roots run deep. Sometimes, the roots of multiple trees will connect and provide added strength. This was Paul's prayer for the Colossians.

Second, they would be **built up in him**. The deeper the foundation, the higher a building can reach. That solid base provides strength and integrity for growth. By taking care of what can't be seen (their roots), the Colossians would glorify God through what was seen (their spiritual growth).

Finally, the Colossians would be **established in the faith**. While this could have referred to personal faith, Paul was likely talking about the larger Christian faith that was in the heretics' crosshairs. The Colossians' maturity would counteract this ongoing assault on true Christianity. Christ would help them recognize the emptiness of false doctrines and uphold the true knowledge of Christ.

The Greek language here emphasizes an ongoing process for each of these areas. As the Colossians continued to mature, they would overflow with **gratitude**. When believers understand the depth of God's forgiveness and faithfulness, they respond with thanksgiving. In contrast, the burden of false teaching offers no motivation for gratitude.

**How can a believer go deeper and grow stronger in understanding Christian truth?**

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## **BE CAREFUL (COL. 2:8-10)**

**<sup>8</sup> Be careful that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit based on human tradition, based on the elements of the world, rather than Christ. <sup>9</sup> For the entire fullness of God's nature dwells bodily in Christ, <sup>10</sup> and you have been filled by him, who is the head over every ruler and authority.**

## VERSE 8

The false teachers were active and determined to lead the church into compromise. They weren't simply misguided Christians who meant well. They were carrying out a systematic attack on Christian faith—spiritual warfare designed to pull people away from Christ. That's why Paul told the Colossians to ***be careful***. The primary consequence of slacking off would be spiritual bondage. Paul noted that they could be taken ***captive through philosophy and empty deceit***. The original wording refers to being kidnapped and put into slavery.

Paul wasn't attacking philosophy in general but a particular worldview that was demonic and hollow. In contrast to the fullness of Christ, the heretics were peddling a spiritual bait-and-switch that offered only empty promises. Paul emphasized its ***human tradition***, meaning it was a man-made attempt to fit God into human boundaries. The heretics were creating God in the image of human beings.

The apostle also said it was based on the ***elements of the world***. Originally, this idea referred to the elements of wind, fire, earth, and water. Later, the definition broadened to mean the basics of anything—the “ABCs” of a matter. Some scholars also believe it could refer to supernatural beings created by and subject to Christ.

Paul's point was that these teachings were clearly non-Christian since they relied on human wisdom or spiritual beings ***rather than Christ***. Any doctrine that leads people away from Christ is dangerous and must be avoided. Regardless of how nicely the world's boxes are wrapped, these cheap substitutes will always come up empty. The gospel is the only reliable filter for matters of faith.

**What are some things people trust as truth? Where do these fall short when compared to the Bible?**

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### **KEY DOCTRINE: *God the Son***

Christ is the eternal Son of God. [See John 1:1-3.]

## VERSES 9-10

Jesus was the cornerstone of Paul's argument against the heretics, because only He possessed ***the entire fullness of God's nature*** in His earthly body. Jesus is completely God and completely human at the same time. The false teachers claimed that God had secrets that only a few could access. Paul refuted that claim. God revealed Himself through Christ. To know the Son is to know the Father.

Just as Christ displayed the nature of God, believers should reflect the nature of Christ. Paul wrote that Jesus ***filled*** the Colossians at the moment of salvation, giving them immediate access to all He had to offer. He held nothing back. Spiritual maturity is nurtured through the One we trust, not what we accomplish—and Jesus has given us all we need.

Of course, Christ has much to offer. He is the ***head over every ruler and authority***. Everything and everyone exists because of Jesus and is subject to Him. Since He provides everything necessary for faith, believers have no reason to invest in teachings that deny Him and hold them captive.

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### **BIBLE SKILL:** *Review a Bible dictionary article.*

Review an article on the incarnation in a Bible dictionary. Look up some of the references identified in the article. Write a summary of how you understand the incarnation of Jesus. How do the passages you examined help you more fully appreciate Jesus? How does the incarnation demonstrate the power and love of God?

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## **REMEMBER** (COL. 2:11-15)

**<sup>11</sup> You were also circumcised in him with a circumcision not done with hands, by putting off the body of flesh, in the circumcision of Christ, <sup>12</sup> when you were buried with him in baptism, in which**

you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.<sup>13</sup> And when you were dead in trespasses and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, he made you alive with him and forgave us all our trespasses.<sup>14</sup> He erased the certificate of debt, with its obligations, that was against us and opposed to us, and has taken it away by nailing it to the cross.<sup>15</sup> He disarmed the rulers and authorities and disgraced them publicly; he triumphed over them in him.

### VERSES 11-12

The false teachers were likely urging the Colossian Christians to add certain “spiritual” practices to their lives as a way to complete their salvation. One of those extras could have been circumcision. Paul reminded the Colossians they had already been circumcised when they accepted Christ—but it was **a circumcision not done with hands**. The wording here indicates a work performed by God, not a human being.

By receiving Christ, they had discarded their **body of flesh**. This transformation was moral, not physical. Through Jesus, their old thoughts and actions had been replaced with His thoughts and actions. Since He had completely transformed their lives, they didn’t need to add anything else to the mix.

In addition to spiritual circumcision, the Colossians had given a physical testimony of their faith. They had been **buried with him in baptism**. This ordinance had provided a public statement that they had died to their old lives and been **raised with him through faith**. Their allegiance now belonged to Christ alone.

As a result, the God who had **raised him from the dead** also gave the Colossians new life. The heretics wanted the church to forget these truths and follow a path of special knowledge and ascetic practices. Paul challenged them to remember what God had done for them and to live in that truth.

**How does baptism serve as a means for declaring a person’s faith in Christ alone?**

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## VERSES 13-14

Apart from Christ, we are **dead in trespasses**. But Jesus changed everything! Paul emphasized four important things Christ does for those who accept Him. First, He makes us **alive**. By sacrificing His life on the cross, Jesus gave us life. Second, Jesus **forgave** us of the trespasses that kept us enslaved. Third, Jesus **erased the certificate of debt**. Transactions in the ancient world were recorded in ledgers, providing written proof of debt. These parchments could also be scraped clean and used again.

A person's disobedience to God's law amasses a huge debt. One might think of a spiritual IOU, in which the one in debt is forgiven of the debt without having to be the one making payment. We who trust Christ as Savior can breathe a sigh of relief in the knowledge that God has marked that IOU as "Paid in Full," **nauling it to the cross** for all to see. As part of ancient crucifixions, officials attached a list of the criminal's charges to the cross. For example, Pilate listed Jesus' crime as being the King of the Jews (Matt. 27:37; John 19:19).

## VERSE 15

Through Jesus' death and resurrection, He **disarmed the rulers and authorities**. The picture is of a conquered enemy stripped of its armor and weapons. Likewise, Jesus removed any authority these pretenders thought they held over humanity. For all practical purposes, the rebellion Satan instigated in Eden was crushed by Jesus' death and resurrection.

Jesus also **disgraced them publicly**. The cross might have seemed humiliating for Jesus. He was an innocent man experiencing a horrible death for a group of rebels who couldn't help themselves. But His death led to the glory of His resurrection—and the downfall of His enemies. They thought they had silenced the Messiah, but God turned the tables and brought them to shame. Instead of being shamed, Jesus **triumphed** over His enemies—and sealed their eternal fate.

Paul encouraged the Colossians to remember both who Christ is and what He has done. Salvation is only possible through Him. No special knowledge or legalistic ritual even comes close. As they recalled these truths, Paul's readers would understand that the false teachers were on the wrong side of history—and eternity.

# APPLY THE TEXT

- Believers are to remain faithful to Christ and His gospel.
- Believers must carefully examine the teachings of others in light of Jesus' being fully God and fully human.
- Through faith in Christ alone, we find forgiveness and victory.

**What safeguards have you put in place to help you remain faithful to Christ? How can you strengthen those safeguards?**

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**What practical steps can you take to filter messages through the truth of the gospel? What will have to change in your life to make that happen?**

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**What can you and the members of your Bible study group do to acknowledge and celebrate Jesus' work in your lives? How can you help others discover Him?**

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## PRAYER NEEDS

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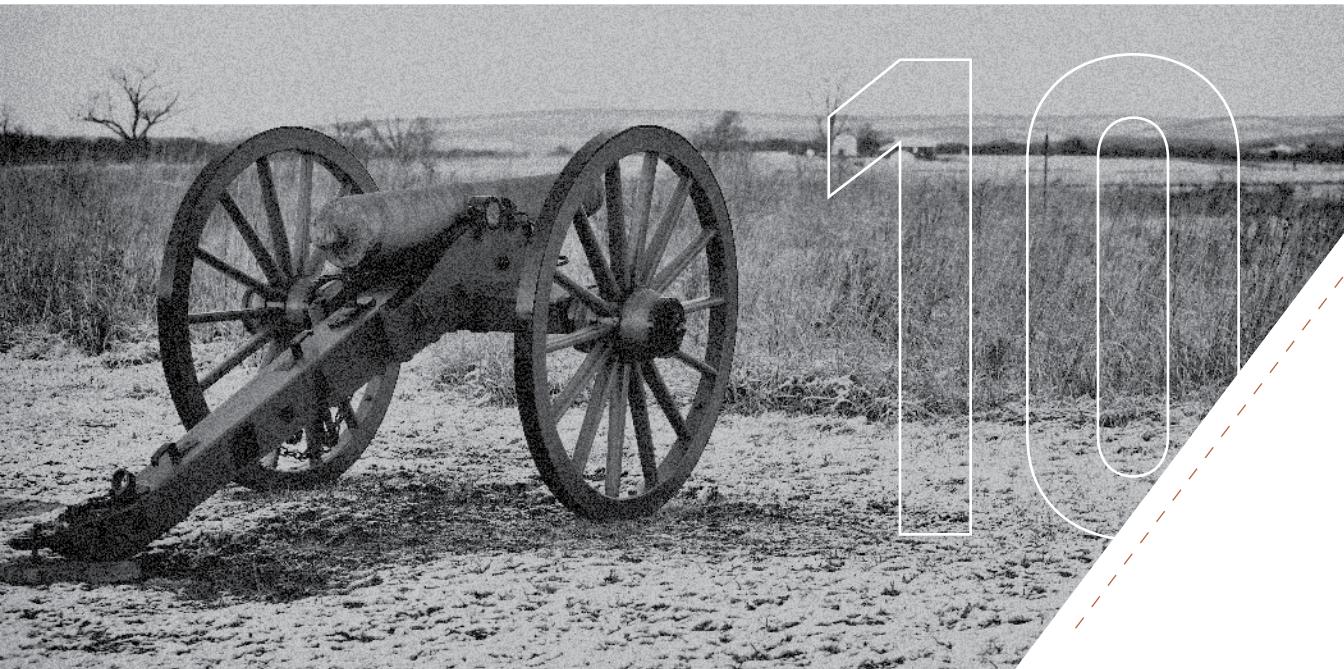
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# *The Gospel's Freedom*

The gospel gives believers the freedom to live a God-honoring life.

## COLOSSIANS 2:16-23

History tells us of soldiers who continued to stand guard after a war had been settled and treaties signed. Some ignored messages about treaties and others simply were never told. They were fighting for something already settled. Some of the Colossian believers were fighting a war already settled as well. False teachers were trying to convince them they needed more than faith in Jesus to have a true relationship with God. In choosing to follow certain legalistic practices, they were trying to fight a battle Jesus had already won.

**What makes it hard for some people to accept the idea that salvation comes through faith in Jesus alone? Why do some people try to add requirements beyond faith in Jesus for gaining favor with God?**

# UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

## **COLOSSIANS 2:16-23**

The false teachers causing trouble in the church at Colossae were using a two-step approach to promote their lies. First, they were raising questions about the nature of Jesus—denying that He really was God. Next, they were teaching that believers needed to practice certain rituals to gain the secret knowledge that filled in the gaps Jesus left behind.

Paul went to great lengths to show that Jesus is completely God and completely human at the same time (Col. 1:15-20). When people saw Him on earth, they were seeing God. He revealed the Father in a way no one else ever could (2:9-10). Paul also emphasized that Jesus holds authority over every corner of creation—including the Colossians and their church. His death and resurrection demonstrated that power.

The false teachers weren't offering anything real. Paul reminded the Colossians that there is a big difference between what has substance and what is only a shadow (2:16-17). The Colossian believers had experienced Christ and knew His teaching was solid. But the heretics' teaching was just an illusion that only led to disappointment and frustration.

Paul also noted a difference between what is eternal and what is temporal (2:20-23). The false teachers were arguing about what people ate and how they treated their bodies. While those things are important, their value is limited to earth. One day, human rules and regulations will fade away, but the truth of the gospel isn't going anywhere. Jesus is eternal, and believers can trust in Him as the foundation for life.

**Read Colossians 2:16-23 in your Bible, looking for the contrasts presented. How would you describe the difference between faith in Jesus alone and a self-made religion?**

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# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## FREEDOM IN WORSHIP (COL. 2:16-17)

**<sup>16</sup> Therefore, don't let anyone judge you in regard to food and drink or in the matter of a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day.**

**<sup>17</sup> These are a shadow of what was to come; the substance is Christ.**

### VERSES 16-17

In the preceding verses (vv. 8-15), Paul emphasized the freedom that comes from Christ. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus had set the Colossians free from both the consequences of sin and the restrictions of rules and regulations. Meanwhile, the false teachers in Colossae were working to keep Christians in spiritual bondage. Their heresy emphasized works and effort, and they had appointed themselves as the final arbiters of true faith. They felt they had earned the right to **judge** others based on their own ideas of orthodoxy.

The Colossians couldn't actually prevent anyone from judging them, but they could control their reactions to those judgments. Paul urged them to reject this theology of legalism and works. The false teachers were obsessed with **food and drink**, which probably involved kosher regulations rather than food sacrificed to idols. They also emphasized special events—like **a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day**—above the God those events were designed to honor.

Some pagan religions held fast to certain dietary restrictions and observed special days on the religious calendar. The false teachers may have been trying to add burdens from the Mosaic law, some kind of idolatrous rituals, or a combination of the two. Whatever the exact situation, Paul challenged the Colossians to reject the condemnation and guilt the heretics were using to manipulate them. Giving in to their threats would demonstrate a lack of faith in the full work of Jesus and would rob them of the freedom they had received through Him.

Because Paul understood the difference between what is real and what is not, he was adamant about avoiding legalistic standards of holiness. The rules and regulations of the law had their place in pointing people to God, but they were only a **shadow** of the truth. The law's main purpose was to remind people that something better—something complete—was on the way.

A shadow is always less important than the body it represents. At best, it serves as an empty, incomplete copy of a tangible object. The “tangible” arrived through Jesus’ incarnation. While sacrifices, dietary laws, and special days foreshadowed God’s plan of redemption, the true **substance** of salvation is **Christ**. He was the One every point of the law had been anticipating.

Allowing the heretics to pull them toward a legalistic religion was a spiritual step backward for the Colossians. Reverting back to the old way of doing things just didn’t make sense.

**How does legalism get in the way of true worship?  
How can you tell the difference in the two?**

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## **FREEDOM FROM FALSEHOODS** (COL. 2:18-19)

**<sup>18</sup> Let no one condemn you by delighting in ascetic practices and the worship of angels, claiming access to a visionary realm. Such people are inflated by empty notions of their unspiritual mind.**

**<sup>19</sup> He doesn’t hold on to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and tendons, grows with growth from God.**

### **VERSES 18-19**

The false teachers’ arsenal also included self-denial and special revelations. To the heretics, these were true indicators of spiritual superiority. To Paul, they were simply more of the same spiritual junk food the believers in Colossae needed to avoid.

The apostle told the Colossians that no one should **condemn** them for relying on Christ alone. The Greek for *condemn* can also mean “disqualify,” like an athlete banned from competition. In other words, the false teachers were playing the role of umpire, using a legalistic checklist to define genuine faith. Paul encouraged his readers to protect their spiritual reward against anyone who would steal it through extra requirements and expectations.

That list included full servings of common, man-made ways to find God and to earn His favor. **Ascetic practices** focused on denying

one's self through rigorous efforts. These "sacrifices" produced a sense of false humility and a condescending attitude. Ironically, the heretics' brand of humility was actually rooted in their own pride.

The false teachers hoped that denying physical pleasures would lead them into heavenly realms and the **worship of angels**. This could mean either that the angels were objects of worship or that the heretics wanted to worship God the way angels did. They wanted to reach supernatural levels of adoration. Supposedly, such ecstatic experiences would provide **access to visionary realms** that validated one's faith. Without comparable experiences, one's faith would fall under suspicion.

For all their pride, the heretics were actually **inflated by empty notions**. In modern terms, they were full of hot air and liked the sound of their own voices. Spiritual experiences have their place, but they are not the standard for genuine faith. That position belongs to Christ alone.

## ***They chased visions instead of pursuing Christ.***

The biggest problem with the heretics was that they failed to **hold on to the head**. They had allowed mystical experiences to become the focus of their faith rather than the Savior. As a result, they chased visions instead of pursuing Christ. Their teaching had a God-shaped hole, which left them disconnected from the Source of genuine spiritual truth.

It is impossible to enjoy a robust spiritual life without leaning into the Author of life. A "headless" faith is a lifeless faith, so maintaining an intimate connection with Jesus is vital for believers. As the head, Jesus leads the **whole body**. Without Him, no believer can think clearly or act correctly. No one experiences spiritual health outside His umbrella.

Paul also noted that the Lord's people are **nourished and held together** by Him. Pursuing the Christian life apart from Christ leads to spiritual starvation, not to mention chaos and disorder. He keeps everything from falling apart. The **ligaments and tendons** could refer to believers' relationships with one another. So damage is not only done to our connection to Christ but also our connection to other Christ followers.

The false teachers believed their practices earned God’s attention and admiration. They thought they had discovered the path to a special relationship with Him. But Paul made it clear that the falsehoods of legalism and mysticism fall short. The only way to enjoy a true, personal relationship with God was to rely completely on Christ and what He did through His death and resurrection.

**Why is it important for the believer to be connected to the Head along with other believers? How can these connections be protected?**

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## **FREEDOM TO LIVE** (COL. 2:20-23)

**<sup>20</sup> If you died with Christ to the elements of this world, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations: <sup>21</sup> “Don’t handle, don’t taste, don’t touch”? <sup>22</sup> All these regulations refer to what is destined to perish by being used up; they are human commands and doctrines. <sup>23</sup> Although these have a reputation for wisdom by promoting self-made religion, false humility, and severe treatment of the body, they are not of any value in curbing self-indulgence.**

### **VERSES 20-21**

The phrase translated *if you died* can also mean “since you died.” Paul wasn’t questioning the Colossians’ salvation. He was assuming it to be a fact. The fact was that they had died to *the elements of this world* when they came to Christ. The spirits of the culture were dominating the false teachers, but the Colossians had embraced the power of God’s Spirit.

The truth of their conversion raised an important question in Paul’s mind. Since they had rejected their old way of living and started following Christ, why were they acting like they *belonged to the world*? They were Christians but were allowing the false teachers to define their faith in unhealthy and ungodly ways.

Primarily, their compromise was showing up in a willingness to *submit to regulations*. Paul warned them about this danger. Instead of leaning into Christ and what He had to say about them, the heretics had created their own rules for holiness and were holding the

Colossian believers to that standard. Individuals disconnected from the Head were calling the shots, telling Christ followers what they should and should not **handle** and **taste** and **touch**. By surrendering to the demands of the false teachers, Paul's readers were sacrificing their freedom in Christ in an attempt to conform to a man-made checklist of good works.

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**BIBLE SKILL:** *Read a Bible dictionary article.*

In a Bible dictionary, read an article about fasting. Review some of the passages listed in the article. Note the reasons and spiritual benefits identified in the article. What are some situations in which fasting produced a positive, God-honoring outcome? What are some temptations that seem easily to attach to the discipline of fasting?

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**VERSE 22**

The problem with the regulations is that they distracted believers from what really mattered in life. Paul noted that the rules treasured by the heretics were **destined to perish by being used up**. In contrast, Christ is eternal. He had no beginning and will have no end. The legalistic rituals and expectations will pass, but the faithfulness of Christ carries believers through this life and the next.

Paul noted that if the Colossians wanted to know what was temporal and what is eternal, they needed to examine the source. The false teachers were promoting **human commands and doctrines**. The ideas and philosophies of the heretics would come and go. Since their teachings were empty, they offered no anchor to protect followers from the winds of change.

## VERSE 23

The false teachers had developed a **reputation** for being spiritual leaders. They had convinced people that they knew something more, something deeper. They had persuaded some in Colossae to follow their path with promises of intimacy with God. But Paul understood the difference between reputation and reality. Behind the shiny trappings, the heretics were simply **promoting self-made religion**.

## **Religious rules and regulations cannot change a life.**

Along with empty theology, the heretics were pushing **false humility** and **severe treatment of the body**. Like the Pharisees of Jesus' day, the false teachers wore a mask of hypocrisy. They were Paul's equivalent to the whitewashed tombs filled with dead men's bones (Matt. 23:27-28). Their inflated egos and ascetic rituals only fueled their pride and arrogance.

Nothing the heretics did or said could draw them (or anyone else) closer to God. Religious rules and regulations cannot change a life. Only Jesus can forgive sin and transform people from darkness to light. Instead of **curbing self-indulgence**, the false teachers only made matters worse. They rationalized their deceptions and fell deeper into spiritual bondage.

**What are some things people try to add to gain salvation or a deeper spirituality? How can the things identified work against the freedom found in Jesus?**

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### **KEY DOCTRINE: Salvation**

There is no salvation apart from personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. (See John 14:6.)

# APPLY THE TEXT

- Believers are free to worship God in light of the gospel.
- Believers are free to enjoy a relationship with God through Christ.
- Believers find freedom through expressing their faith in Christ in all areas of their lives.

**What legalistic rules do you struggle with the most? How can you apply Paul's teaching to your situation?**

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**Discuss the role believers play in helping each other stay connected to God. What actions might your group need to take in light of your discussion?**

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**To what evidence can you point as proof that you have died with Christ to the elements of this world? With whom can you share about the freedom found through faith in Jesus?**

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## PRAYER NEEDS

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# *The Gospel Lived*

Believers are to reflect Christlike character in their daily lives.

## **COLOSSIANS 3:1-17**

Most of us choose what we wear with purpose. We may pick an outfit that sets us apart or helps us blend in. Sometimes, what we choose to wear may make it harder for others to see Jesus in us. Paul challenged the Colossians to get rid of anything that distorted the image of Christ in their lives. We need to provide an accurate reflection of our Savior as well.

**Tell about a time you intentionally selected an outfit to portray a particular image of yourself. How did what you wore impact how others perceived you?**

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# UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

## **COLOSSIANS 3:1-17**

In the first half of his letter to the Colossians, Paul carefully laid out a theological defense of Jesus and His work. Paul's theology of Christ was solid, but he also understood that the Christian life was more than a set of theological doctrines. Faith is to be lived out in the real world every day. So as he started the second half of his epistle, he turned his attention to practical application.

Paul's ultimate focus stayed on Christ. The only way for anyone to live out the Christian faith is to remain focused on Jesus (Col. 3:1-4). By keeping their eyes on the reality of heaven, believers can navigate the stuff of earth.

Unbelievers recognize Jesus best through the lives of His followers. As a result, Christians need to do all they can to provide the best reflection of Christ possible. That requires rejecting behaviors that contradict His teachings and embracing actions and attitudes that imitate Him (3:5-17). Like taking off dirty clothes and replacing them with clean garments, Christians are consistently letting go of their old ways and renewing their lives to become more like Christ. As they do, they provide an effective and powerful witness before a watching world.

**Read Colossians 3:1-17 in your Bible, listing the directives given by Paul. How do these directives compare to the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20?**

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# EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

## **A NEW LIFE** (COL. 3:1-4)

**<sup>1</sup> So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the 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 hidden with Christ in God. <sup>4</sup> When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.**

## VERSES 1-2

For Paul, practical Christianity rested on the same foundation as his theology: Christ. Just as the Colossians recognized orthodox beliefs through the lens of Jesus, they also would live out the gospel by focusing on Him. Colossians 3:1-4 provided a hinge to connect theology to practical living guided by Christ's supremacy.

The apostle emphasized that believers were ***raised with Christ***. They had died to their old natures and been spiritually resurrected to a new life. They didn't need to earn favor with God. The false teachers emphasized works, but Christians rest in what God has already accomplished through Jesus.

This new life has implications for daily living. Paul challenged the Colossians to ***seek the things above***. In the Greek, this is an imperative (a command) and references a diligent pursuit of heavenly things—specifically Christ. The image of Christ at the ***right hand of God*** reminded readers of Jesus' power and authority—something the false teachers had denied.

The apostle added a second imperative: ***Set your minds on things above***. This is in direct contrast to ***earthly things*** that become distractions. Earthly things have their place because believers live in two domains: the fallen world and the heavenly realm. But where the mind goes, the life will follow. The key for the new life is learning to think rightly, keeping a consistent focus on Christ's rule.

**What are the dangers of failing to focus on Christ or losing that focus?**

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## VERSES 3-4

Paul encouraged the Colossians to remember the past, recognize the present, and anticipate the future. Regarding the past, Paul again used the illustration of spiritual death. When the Colossians accepted Christ, they ***died*** to sin. He released them from spiritual bondage and provided a new freedom from sin.

In the present, their lives were now ***hidden with Christ in God***. He had raised them and given them a reason to live. The wording here indicates something protected or held in security. It also can refer

to something with unseen potential. So, believers are sustained in Christ—their Source—while awaiting a reality yet to be revealed.

Jesus does not just give new life; He **is your life**. If you could imagine the areas of your life—home, church, work, relationships, and so forth—as spokes in a wheel, Christ is the hub that holds them in place and keeps them operating efficiently. If a spoke disconnects from the hub, the entire wheel suffers.

Paul also knew that we could have hope for the present and future, regardless of our past. One day, Christ will return. When He does, His followers **will appear with him in glory**. The heretics believed works unlocked spiritual potential, but Paul knew that only Christ has that power.

## **PUT OFF** (COL. 3:5-11)

**<sup>5</sup> Therefore, put to death what belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desire, and greed, which is idolatry. <sup>6</sup> Because of these, God’s wrath is coming upon the disobedient, <sup>7</sup> and you once walked in these things when you were living in them. <sup>8</sup> But now, put away all the following: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and filthy language from your mouth. <sup>9</sup> Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old self with its practices <sup>10</sup> and have put on the new self. You are being renewed in knowledge according to the image of your Creator. <sup>11</sup> In Christ there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all.**

### **VERSES 5-7**

Paul commanded the Colossians to **put to death** their old ways of thinking and acting. He provided several examples of behaviors that needed daily execution. The first four behaviors involved sexual sins that were probably common in Colossian culture. **Sexual immorality** involves any sexual activity outside the confines of one man and one woman in the context of marriage. **Impurity** relates to the general uncleanness that stains the purity provided by Christ. **Lust** and **evil desire** are related and feed off each other, one describing improper appetites and the other describing the fulfillment of those appetites.

Paul associated **greed** with **idolatry**. *Greed* describes one’s improper desire to accumulate more. That desire can be so strong it overwhelms

everything else in life—including a passion for God. Using the Ten Commandments, a violation of the tenth command is also a violation of the first.

Paul made it clear that sin provokes **God's wrath**. He never winks at our rebellion. His intense justice and righteous anger lead to judgment against those who are **disobedient**. Thankfully, the Colossians had escaped God's wrath. While they had **once walked** under condemnation, they had accepted Christ's death to satisfy the Father's judgment.

### VERSES 8-10

Believers face an ongoing spiritual battle. Using another list, Paul urged the Colossians to **put away** five sins as part of that battle. In this list, he highlighted offenses that tear at the fabric of unity within the church. Paul began with **anger** and **wrath**. The first boils internally, while the other takes the form of external outbursts. **Malice** involves intentionally returning evil for good or plotting evil against an innocent victim. **Slander** and **filthy language** are both verbal sins. One improperly assaults another's character or reputation, and the other describes abusive and profane talk. The apostle commanded the Colossians not to **lie to one another**. While this includes spoken words, Paul also targeted a lack of integrity at every level.

In response to God's work in them, the Colossians had **put off the old self**. The image here indicates removing old, dirty clothes. They had removed their "dirty laundry" at salvation. Paul reminded them they had **put on the new self**. Just as the dirty clothes are removed, clean clothes take their place. This involved being **renewed in knowledge**. Knowledge of Christ grows over time.

Christ is the image of God (Col. 1:15), and the goal of Christian maturity is to reflect His image accurately to others. The more believers learn from Christ, the better they reflect the **image** of their **Creator**. Genesis affirms that God created humans in His image (Gen. 1:27), but that image was marred by sin. God's restoration begins at salvation and continues until eternity—drawing the world's attention in the meantime.

### VERSE 11

The hostility between the **Greek** and **Jew** and the **circumcision** and **uncircumcision** was common. The first was based on ethnic

background, while the second involved questions of spiritual superiority. **Barbarian** and **Scythian** were both insulting terms used for those considered uneducated or uncultured. The distinction was primarily in degree, with Scythians seen as more uncivilized than barbarians. The Colossian church probably included both **slave** and **free**, a reminder that God plays no economic or social favorites.

These differences ring hollow because **Christ is all and in all**. He is the common denominator who offers salvation to everyone—because everyone needs Him. Our relationship with Him is what matters, meaning the only important distinction lies between believers and unbelievers. The gospel unifies believers.

**How does Christ enable a person to stop living a life dominated by sin?**

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**BIBLE SKILL:** *Compare Bible passages with similar themes.*

Compare Colossians 3:1-17 with Galatians 5:16-26; Ephesians 5:1-10; and 1 Timothy 6:3-12. On a separate sheet of paper, make a two-column chart, listing the vices in one column and the virtues in the other. Identify which vices and virtues are referenced most frequently. Which of the vices do you deem most prominent today? Which virtues would you most desire to be prominent among your Christian friends?

**PUT ON** (COL. 3:12-17)

**<sup>12</sup> Therefore, as God's chosen ones, holy and dearly loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, <sup>13</sup> bearing with one another and forgiving one another if anyone has a grievance against another. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you are also to forgive. <sup>14</sup> Above all, put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. <sup>15</sup> And let the peace of Christ, to which you were also called in one body, rule your hearts. And be thankful. <sup>16</sup> Let the word of Christ dwell richly among you, in all wisdom teaching and**

**admonishing one another through psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.** <sup>17</sup> **And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.**

### VERSES 12-13

As Paul urged the Colossians to remove their old ways, he also challenged them to **put on** something new. Since they were **chosen** and **dearly loved** by God, they were redeemed for a new purpose. Their new lifestyle would reflect the true nature of Jesus.

Each quality on Paul's list related to interpersonal relationships. When individuals are right with God, they will be right with others. The first two qualities were **compassion** and **kindness**. The first indicates merciful and sympathetic feelings toward others, while the second translates those feelings into benevolent action. He also encouraged them to show **humility, gentleness, and patience**. Seeing self from God's perspective avoids the heretics' trap of pride. It puts the needs of others first and endures offenses without retaliation.

Christians aren't called to suppress a **grievance** passively. Instead, they actively and consistently show forgiveness. That's possible only when we remember the forgiveness offered by Christ. Those who are forgiven much must be willing to forgive others—and to the same degree the **Lord has forgiven you**.

### VERSES 14-15

One item on Paul's list stood **above all**. First and foremost, the Colossians should **put on love**. (See 1 Cor. 13:13.) Love represents the **perfect bond of unity**. Without it, our good efforts deteriorate into legalism and checklists for earning God's favor. Love provides the proper motivation for a Christlike lifestyle. In addition, God is defined by His love (1 John 4:7-8), so it's impossible to reflect Him without it.

Believers should also allow God's peace to **rule your hearts**. Peace ultimately rests on a personal relationship with God through Jesus. Before accepting Christ, humans are at war with God, but the hostilities end when we give our lives to Jesus. This peace with God promotes peace with others and nurtures harmony within the church. Paul also told the Colossians to be **thankful**. Genuine gratitude cures many spiritual ills because it rejects selfish motives and actions.

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## KEY DOCTRINE: *The Scriptures*

God's Word is the perfect treasure of divine instruction.  
(See 2 Tim. 3:16-17.)

### VERSE 16

Paul emphasized the ***word of Christ***, the oral and written messages about Christ shared first by the apostles and later by other believers. These truths offered the foundational principles for the Christian journey. As the Colossians embraced Jesus' teachings, their lives were transformed and they became more like Him.

Paul noted that these doctrines were transmitted in different forms. For example, early church leaders were charged with ***teaching*** (instructions on what to do) and ***admonishing*** (warnings on what to avoid). This certainly involved the spoken word, but music also plays a role in discipleship. Paul mentioned ***psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs*** as parts of first-century worship. These songs became a means for teaching, as believers sang their declaration of faith and belief.

### VERSE 17

Jesus is the ultimate standard for the Christian life. Whatever believers do—***in word or in deed***—is to be filtered through Him. When questions arise, we judge our words or actions by the ***name of the Lord Jesus***. If we can sincerely say that Christ would give His blessing to an activity, we can move forward. Otherwise, we should avoid it. Paul connected this principle to ***giving thanks***. If we can thank God for a word or action, we have no problem. If not, we need to seek another option.

**How is dwelling on God's Word different from simply reading it?**

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# APPLY THE TEXT

- Believers are to focus on Christ and the life He provides them.
- Because of their salvation, believers are to stop living a life characterized by sin.
- Believers are changed as they dwell on and yield to the truths of the Bible.

**What steps should you take to more readily keep your mind set on “things above?” How do you make those activities a part of your life each day?**

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**Discuss as a group ways of encouraging each other to put on a life that reflects Christ. How can the group help each other to reflect Christ in a greater way?**

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**How can you intentionally dwell on God’s Word this week?  
What needs to change for you to do so?**

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## PRAYER NEEDS

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# *The Gospel and Relationships*

Believers live and relate differently as a result of the gospel.

## **COLOSSIANS 3:18–4:6**

God wired us to relate to one another. We do life together as families, friends, and coworkers. So it's no surprise that when Paul addressed practical Christian living, he spent a lot of time talking about our relationships. When we're properly connected to God, the gospel transforms our connections with everyone else. This gives the lost world around us something to think about.

**What characteristics do you look for in a friend? How do those compare to what you want in a coworker?**

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# UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

## **COLOSSIANS 3:1–4:18**

As Paul turned the corner in the second half of his letter to the Colossian believers, he turned his focus from theological arguments to practical application. The false teachers had attempted to impose their ideas of what spiritual living involved, but the apostle challenged their heresies and presented a Christ-centered approach to living out their faith.

Having addressed the Colossians' personal lives in 3:1-17, Paul wrote to them about the gospel's impact on their relationships (Col. 3:18–4:6). Nothing is more practical than our day-in and day-out connections with one another. He taught the Colossians about family relationships, focusing on husband-wife and parent-child dynamics. He also urged the Colossians to consider their employee-employer relationships and their responsibility to the lost. Paul emphasized mutual responsibility, but the focus remained on Christ. If a believer's relationship with Christ is healthy, relationships with others will be healthy as well.

Paul ended his letter with a series of greetings to individuals connected to the congregation. The letter closed with a blessing and his personal signature (Col. 4:18).

**Read Colossians 3:18–4:6 in your Bible. How are relationships with others a reflection of our relationship to Christ?**

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# EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

## **IN OUR FAMILIES** (COL. 3:18-21)

**<sup>18</sup> Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. <sup>19</sup> Husbands, love your wives and don't be bitter toward them. <sup>20</sup> Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. <sup>21</sup> Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they won't become discouraged.**

## VERSE 18

No one knows you better than the people living under your roof. When Paul talked about relationships, it made sense to start with a focus on families. He challenged wives to **submit** to their husbands. This word emphasizes a voluntary response to a husband’s God-given authority—not forced servitude.

It’s also important to see that submission includes boundaries. Voluntary submission is not the same as required obedience. Rather, wives submit in a way that is **fitting in the Lord** and honors the authority of Christ. Her submission at home is an outworking of her salvation and her surrender to Christ.

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### **BIBLE SKILL:** *Create a comparison chart.*

Compare Colossians 3:18–4:6 with Ephesians 5:22–6:9. Create a chart listing similarities and differences. What do the similarities reveal about the consistency of Paul’s teachings? How do the differences add depth in understanding the expectations for believers in their relationships?

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## VERSE 19

While wives are called to submit, husbands are commanded to **love**. This love was not simply the stuff of fairy tales. Paul used a form of the Greek word *agape*, which defines the same sacrificial love that God has for the world. As Paul told the Ephesians, a husband’s affection for his wife should imitate Christ’s sacrificial affection for the church (Eph. 5:25).

It has been noted that when husbands love properly, wives tend to submit appropriately. Paul taught his readers that husbands should refuse to be **bitter** toward their wives, a word that also means “harsh” or “irritating.” The idea is that a husband should not abuse

his authority. Even in disagreement, husbands should be tender and compassionate, avoiding anything that would produce grudges or a spirit of bitterness.

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### **KEY DOCTRINE: *The Family***

God has ordained the family as the foundational institution of human society. (See Gen. 1:26-27.)

### **VERSES 20-21**

Paul moved from husband-wife relationships to parent-child dynamics. He was specifically addressing younger children still living at home. That he included commands to children means that they were probably present when the letter was read. Paul obviously viewed children as integral members of the church body, not mere observers waiting to reach their potential.

The primary responsibility of children was to ***obey your parents in everything***. While the wording is much stronger than the submission expected of wives, the motivation is just as clear: obedience ***pleases the Lord***. God made this obligation clear through the law, placing it at the heart of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:12). As Paul noted in a corresponding passage to the Ephesians, this was the lone command that included a promise—a blessed and fruitful life (Eph. 6:1-3).

Paul focused on the actions of ***fathers***. He was not saying that mothers had no role in raising or disciplining children. But as the spiritual head of the home, fathers are expected to set the tone and provide the ongoing example of genuine Christianity. That example should not ***exasperate*** or embitter children. This is the result of nagging and finding fault rather than edifying or providing loving correction. This does not mean that parents should never upset their kids. However, they should always filter discipline through love. In that way, their offspring won't become ***discouraged***. In other words, parental discipline will not break the spirit of children or make them question their worth. Discipline should respect the standing of children as brothers and sisters in Christ and lead them toward deeper levels of faith.

## How does loving discipline of children in the home demonstrate godly concern and foster character?

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### IN OUR WORK (COL. 3:22–4:1)

**<sup>22</sup> Slaves, obey your human masters in everything. Don't work only while being watched, as people-pleasers, but work wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. <sup>23</sup> Whatever you do, do it from the heart, as something done for the Lord and not for people, <sup>24</sup> knowing that you will receive the reward of an inheritance from the Lord. You serve the Lord Christ. <sup>25</sup> For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong he has done, and there is no favoritism. <sup>4:1</sup> Masters, deal with your slaves justly and fairly, since you know that you too have a Master in heaven.**

### VERSE 22

Slavery was common in the first century. It was more about political and economic issues than about ethnicity or race. Citizens of a conquered country faced the possibility of becoming servants as the result of a defeat. People caught in debt also placed themselves or their families under the care of the one to whom they owed the debt.

Servants were important members of early Christian congregations. Most likely, a fugitive servant named Onesimus helped deliver the letter to the Colossians as he returned to his master, Philemon (Col. 4:9). The relationship that masters and servants shared with Christ motivated Paul to spell out guidelines for how they should relate to one another. Servants had little power in most first-century settings. But within the church, they stood as equals in Christ.

The relationship between first-century masters and servants may be compared to employers and employees in the workplace today, with one major difference—we can choose who we are employed by. Paul used two words to sum up the workers' side of the relationship: obey and serve. First, he told servants to **obey** their masters, using the same word as he had used when instructing children in verse 20.

Some servants had a reputation for working hard **while being watched** but slacking off when others were not around. This was the

habit of *people-pleasers*. Godly character demands that workers strive for excellence whether anyone is watching or not.

***No matter who signs our paychecks,  
we work for the glory of God.***

### VERSES 23-25

Even before the fall in Eden, God created work as a blessing. He gave Adam and Eve purpose by allowing them to tend the garden. God affirms the dignity of work. Since work is His gift to us, we should work **from the heart**. Laziness and shirking responsibility is not an option for Christian workers.

Ultimately, Christian employees work **for the Lord and not for people**. The Christian life cannot be dissected in pieces, where God has influence over some areas and is unconcerned about others. Work provides purpose and dignity because no matter who signs our paychecks, we work for the glory of God. Our work is a reflection on Him.

Servants might have received little financial gain for their work, and they almost certainly earned no inheritance. But Paul promised the **reward of an inheritance** that reaches beyond this world. No effort performed for God's honor goes unnoticed in the kingdom.

Paul reminded the Colossians that there was another side of the coin. While those who worked well would be rewarded, the **wrongdoer will be paid back**. In another letter, Paul taught the general principle of sowing and reaping (Gal. 6:7-10). Here, he applied it specifically to the workplace. That's because God never shows **favoritism**. His righteousness and justice demand appropriate responses to our actions, whether positive or negative.

### VERSE 1

Masters were expected to protect those under their authority. They were also subject to the blessings and curses of their choices. Paul challenged masters to act **justly and fairly**. In some cases, that might mean setting servants free. For others, a servant might be safer under the protection of the master's family umbrella. In every situation, though, dignity and respect were the goal.

This standard for masters was rooted in the example of Jesus Himself. Paul reminded the masters that they have a ***Master in heaven***. God chose to sacrifice for His creation and to treat all His servants better than they deserved. In today's terms, employers should also protect their employees—and recall that they will ultimately answer to Christ for their actions.

**Why is it important to remember that God cares about what happens in the workplace? What does that say to us about other areas of our lives?**

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## IN OUR INTERACTIONS (COL. 4:2-6)

<sup>2</sup> Devote yourselves to prayer; stay alert in it with thanksgiving. <sup>3</sup> At the same time, pray also for us that God may open a door to us for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains, <sup>4</sup> so that I may make it known as I should. <sup>5</sup> Act wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time. <sup>6</sup> Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you should answer each person.

### VERSES 2-4

The apostle opened this letter with a call to prayer (1:9-14), and he ended it with another call for the Colossians to ***devote*** themselves and to ***stay alert*** in this discipline. This implies a commitment to pray, even when the answer is not immediate. Prayer is intentional and active. It embraces the needs of others and is fueled by a spirit of ***thanksgiving*** that anticipates a response.

If the Colossians wondered where to start in their prayers for others, Paul had two specific answers. First, he urged them to ask God to continue opening doors for ministry. Even under house arrest, Paul was always seeking new channels for sharing the ***mystery of Christ*** and the message of salvation. Second, he asked them to pray that he would walk through whatever doors God opened. He knew that seeing opportunities meant little if he didn't take advantage of them. This meant sharing the gospel clearly, making it known and understood. If he failed to communicate Christ in a way that drew people to the Savior, he was failing in his mission.

## What role should prayer play in our relationships? How does praying for each other strengthen a relationship?

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### VERSES 5-6

Paul addressed two other elements related to evangelism: our walk and our words. He encouraged the Colossians to **act wisely** toward **outsiders**, approaching them with a combination of boldness and tact. The Colossians encountered lost people every day, and their witness depended on wisely living out what they believed.

The Colossians also needed wisdom because time was limited. Christians must focus on **making the most of the time** God has provided. The Greek wording here can also mean to “buy back” or “redeem.” In other words, the Colossians should use their time well and share Christ every chance they got.

You’ve probably heard that honey draws flies better than vinegar. That’s an important reminder that our speech often determines our ability to persuade. Harsh, condemning tones and words build walls. But a loving approach opens hearts. Paul’s advice to the Colossians was to rely on **gracious** communication, both in what they said and how they said it.

***The gospel’s message is better received when presented with genuine love and concern.***

Paul wasn’t talking about pandering to vanity or manipulating emotions. He wasn’t encouraging them to water down the truth to make it more acceptable. Instead, their words should be **seasoned with salt**. Just like a meal is better when the right spices are added, the gospel’s message is better received when presented with genuine love and concern.

Paul encouraged his readers to **answer each person**. Conversation, not condemnation, is the key. But this takes prayer and preparation, along with a sincere love for people and a willingness to meet them where they are.

# APPLY THE TEXT

- Believers should foster healthy families.
- Believers can demonstrate Christ in how they work and lead.
- Believers should depend upon prayer to guide them as they interact with others.

**Discuss with your group ways the members of your Bible study can support families. What actions need to be taken because of this discussion?**

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**What can you do to nurture dignity and respect for everyone in your workplace? What action will you take this week to demonstrate dignity and respect?**

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**Evaluate your relationships, looking for ways prayer impacts each relationship. In which relationships do you need to be more intentional when it comes to prayer? How?**

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## PRAYER NEEDS

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# *Restoration*

Believers forgive others since they too have been forgiven.

## **PHILEMON 8-21**

Christ changes people. He takes timid fishermen and makes them into courageous leaders. He takes critics and makes them into apostles. He takes what was once useless and makes it useful for His kingdom. That's why the apostle Paul encouraged his friend, Philemon, to accept God's transformative work in the life of a wayward servant named Onesimus. Such an act of acceptance would prove the gospel's power to a watching world. It's an act we can imitate today.

**Who would you point to as an example of the difference Christ makes in a person's life?**

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# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## PHILEMON 1-25

Paul wrote to Philemon around the same time he wrote to the Colossians, and the two letters were probably delivered at the same time. Understanding this letter's message requires understanding the connection between three individuals. Paul, a mutual friend and spiritual father to both Philemon and Onesimus, wrote the letter while under house arrest in Rome. Meanwhile, Philemon was a wealthy friend of Paul who likely became a Christian under Paul's ministry. The church at Colossae met in Philemon's home (Philem. 2).

Onesimus was Philemon's servant before running away, possibly with stolen money. Under God's direction, Onesimus ended up in Rome, where he met Paul and also became a Christian. As a believer, integrity demanded that Onesimus return to Philemon. So along with his letter to the whole Colossian congregation, the apostle also sent this personal letter to the church's host.

Because of his special relationship with Philemon, Paul felt free to boldly mediate on behalf of Onesimus (vv. 8-16). The older mentor resisted the opportunity to make demands based on apostolic authority. Instead, he talked with Philemon as a friend, urging him to treat Onesimus as he would treat Paul. He reminded Philemon that his servant was now his spiritual brother and even offered to reimburse Philemon for any loss from Onesimus' actions.

Under Roman law, Philemon had the right to punish Onesimus for his crimes. While readers are not told exactly how he responded, it is widely assumed that Philemon honored Paul's request.

Even though the letter is short, its message has resonated through church history. The letter reminds readers that we are all equal in God's sight—equal in our sinfulness, equal in our need for a Savior, and equal in our standing as members of His body.

**Read Philemon 8-21 in your Bible, noting how each person was connected. Why are these connections important in this story?**

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# EXPLORE THE TEXT

## SENT (PHILEM. 8-12)

<sup>8</sup> For this reason, although I have great boldness in Christ to command you to do what is right, <sup>9</sup> I appeal to you, instead, on the basis of love. I, Paul, as an elderly man and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus, <sup>10</sup> appeal to you for my son, Onesimus. I became his father while I was in chains. <sup>11</sup> Once he was useless to you, but now he is useful both to you and to me. <sup>12</sup> I am sending him back to you—I am sending my very own heart.

### VERSES 8-10

Paul urged Philemon to receive Onesimus as a man changed by Christ. By his apostolic authority, he could **command** Philemon to follow his directions. But Paul's relationship with Philemon ran deeper than that. He didn't order Philemon to **do what is right**. Paul instead encouraged his friend to take the right action for the right reasons.

Paul made his request on the **basis of love**. He emphasized Philemon's love for fellow believers, which now included Onesimus. While the master-servant relationship still existed between Philemon and Onesimus, Christlike love now governed how they would treat one another.

Paul used two terms to describe himself here. He called himself **an elderly man** and a **prisoner of Christ**. Paul was reminding his friend of his own Christian maturity and his suffering for the gospel. Paul understood what Jesus expected from Philemon.

The substance of Paul's **appeal** is made clear in verse 10. The term *appeal* can vary in its intensity, but here the Greek carries a strong emotion. Paul begged Philemon to honor his request. The foundation of the plea was Onesimus's faith in Christ.

The apostle had told the Colossians that believers have put on the new self and are being renewed (Col. 3:10), and he had seen that transformation in Onesimus. Paul also recognized how God had used two negative events—the servant's rebellion and the apostle's incarceration—to create something good. Through the experience, Paul had gained a **son** in the faith, Onesimus had gained eternal life, and Philemon had gained a spiritual brother.

**What are some other examples of how God brought something positive out of what felt like a negative situation? How does that help us trust God more?**

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### **VERSES 11-12**

Onesimus had become *useless* to Philemon by stealing and running away. Now, instead of being worthless, Paul indicated that the wayward servant was *useful both to you and to me*. The name *Onesimus* literally means “useful” or “profitable.” Paul made a play on the meaning of the name when he acknowledged that Onesimus had become *useless* to his owner after he ran away.

Paul understood where Onesimus had been but did not keep the servant stuck in his past. Onesimus had been a great help to Paul in Rome, encouraging him and ministering to his needs. In Colossae, Onesimus would be useful to Philemon again. Even more important, he would be useful for the gospel and the Colossian congregation.

As Paul sent Onesimus to his master, he wasn’t just returning a wayward servant. He was sending his *very own heart*. This was no easy decision because Paul treasured his fellowship with Onesimus. The wayward servant had become a part of Paul’s ministry family, and the aging apostle had developed a special affection for him. Now, he was urging Philemon to respond with similar Christian love.

It is worth noting that Onesimus made this trip voluntarily. He had run away before, and he could do it again, regardless of Paul’s desire. Onesimus’ journey back to Colossae was an act of obedience and discipleship. It was his first step in making things right with Philemon as a Christian brother.

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### **DID YOU KNOW?**

At the beginning of the first century, it is estimated slaves made up at least half of the population of the Roman Empire. By the century’s end, the city of Rome had 400,000 slaves, one-third of the populace. Many households had several slaves, and a wealthy master might have as many as a thousand—so many that he did not recognize them all.

## AS A BROTHER (PHILEM. 13-16)

**<sup>13</sup> I wanted to keep him with me, so that in my imprisonment for the gospel he might serve me in your place. <sup>14</sup> But I didn't want to do anything without your consent, so that your good deed might not be out of obligation, but of your own free will. <sup>15</sup> For perhaps this is why he was separated from you for a brief time, so that you might get him back permanently, <sup>16</sup> no longer as a slave, but more than a slave—as a dearly loved brother. He is especially so to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.**

### VERSES 13-14

Living under house arrest, Paul had developed a strong bond with Onesimus. The wayward servant had proven himself useful during Paul's imprisonment. Paul sincerely wished he could **keep him** in Rome a little longer. But he couldn't do that in good conscience or in accordance to Roman law.

Paul could have made the argument that Onesimus could serve as a proxy for Philemon. The distance between Rome and Colossae made it impossible for Philemon to personally minister to his father in the faith. However, Onesimus could serve Paul **in your place**. But good ends could not justify improper means.

Paul refused to do anything about Philemon's servant without his **consent**. As noted, Onesimus needed to go back to Colossae to make things right with Philemon. Just as Paul refused to use his apostolic authority inappropriately, he would not turn a **good deed** into an **obligation**. He gave Philemon the freedom to make a **free will** offering instead of a required sacrifice.

Legally, Philemon had several options. He could sell Onesimus or punish him for his crimes. Paul urged him to choose mercy and grace over retribution. But whatever the decision, Philemon had to make the choice on his own—without pressure from Paul. Out of respect, Paul left the decision with his friend.

**Why was it important for Philemon to act on his own, without Paul commanding action?**

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## VERSES 15-16

Change had taken place in Onesimus's life. That change would also have an important impact on Philemon. The servant he had lost was coming back as a brother. That was Paul's message to his friend. He acknowledged that Philemon had been **separated** from Onesimus for a time. The apostle did not try to justify Onesimus's actions or excuse his past. But he encouraged Philemon to see beyond past wrongs and focus on things from God's perspective.

God used the **brief time** that Onesimus had been gone to make an eternal difference. The temporary loss turned into a permanent recovery. Philemon had lost services of his servant for a season, but he gained so much more. He would now be spending eternity with him.

From the moment of salvation, Onesimus ceased to be simply a servant in Philemon's household. He had become a **dearly loved brother**. Their social positions still differed, but they were equal in God's eyes. For Onesimus, his new relationship with Christ meant a new relationship with his human master. What the world probably saw as a situation damaged beyond repair, God redeemed for His glory.

Paul emphasized two aspects of the brotherhood Philemon shared with Onesimus. The first was **in the flesh**. Even if Onesimus remained a servant in Philemon's home, their physical reunion meant a partnership for the gospel. But their relationship also resonated **in the Lord**. Long after both men passed into eternity, their connection would still be strong and active in heaven.

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### KEY DOCTRINE: *Man*

The sacredness of human personality is evident in that God created man in His own image, and in that Christ died for man; therefore, every person of every race possesses full dignity and is worthy of respect and Christian love. (See Rom. 8:14-18.)

### SO WELCOME HIM (PHILEM. 17-21)

<sup>17</sup> **So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would me.**

<sup>18</sup> **And if he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.** <sup>19</sup> **I, Paul, write this with my own hand:**

**I will repay it — not to mention to you that you owe me even your very self.** <sup>20</sup> **Yes, brother, may I benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.** <sup>21</sup> **Since I am confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.**

### VERSES 17-18

While Paul had reminded Philemon of their friendship and even hinted at his spiritual authority, his ultimate goal was the success of the gospel. He urged Philemon: **consider me a partner** in the faith.

The Greek word for *partner* is related to *koinonia*, which is often used to describe Christian fellowship and generous behavior. The partnership shared by Paul and Philemon—and now Onesimus—was rooted in their relationship with Christ. They were members of the same team pursuing the same goal: spreading the gospel. Being so joined in Christ produced bonds that could not be ignored.

Paul encouraged Philemon to **welcome** the servant back into his home and into the life of the church. He noted that accepting Onesimus would be the same as accepting the imprisoned apostle. In God's economy, the servant has equal footing to the apostle. The Father accepts all because the Son died for all.

By running away, Onesimus had created headaches for Philemon. He had stolen time, service, and possibly money. If Philemon added up all these expenses, Onesimus would face a mountain of debt with no way to repay it.

But Paul again stepped in to support his new friend. He offered to pick up the tab if it would reconcile Philemon and Onesimus. Primarily, he promised to reimburse whatever the wayward servant **owes** Philemon, urging his friend to **charge** those expenses to his account. The personal sacrifice would be worth the effort if he could mediate a resolution. Through this, Paul also demonstrated sacrificial love for both men. Scholars have noted how his actions illustrated the sacrifice of Christ who reconciles rebels to their Master by paying their debt.

### VERSES 19-21

To prove his sincerity, Paul wrote his offer **with my own hand**. In the ancient world, writers, including Paul, often used an assistant, called an *amanuensis*, to record their thoughts. Paul added emphasis here by highlighting his own handwriting. He was serious about his promise.

Paul assured Philemon: ***I will repay it.*** But while he accepted this obligation, he also reminded Philemon that he owed Paul a much greater debt: ***your very self.*** This likely means Philemon owed his conversion to Paul (v. 19). This conversion possibly took place during Paul’s ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19:10). Now Philemon had the opportunity to put his faith in action by welcoming his wayward servant. He could demand his rights as an offended owner, but Paul encouraged him to let God’s grace guide his actions.

Essentially, Philemon had a choice between financial concerns and spiritual concerns. The apostle was ready to eliminate money as an argument against reconciliation. This allowed spiritual obedience to take precedence over material matters.

**What roadblocks might get in the way of reconciliation between people? How does the gospel impact those roadblocks?**

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Paul earnestly believed Philemon would do the right thing. He was ***confident*** Philemon would hear his words and adopt Christ’s perspective. The apostle was even sure that Philemon would ***do even more than I say*** in regard to Onesimus. While we are not told exactly how Philemon reacted, some suspect that he ended up releasing Onesimus. Whether he did or not, it is reasonable to assume that Paul’s trust was well placed and that Philemon accepted Onesimus as a fellow believer.

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**BIBLE SKILL: Review similar situations.**

Review Acts 15:36-41 and 2 Timothy 4:11. Compare Paul’s relationship with Mark to Philemon’s relationship with Onesimus. How did both Paul and Philemon look beyond the past to restore a relationship? What principles can be seen in both situations?

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# Friendship: Lessons from Philippians



By John Polhill

Friendship was a constant topic of discussion among the Greeks and Romans. Aristotle, Plato, and Cicero wrote significant treatments of the subject. They generally agreed that true friendship was among those who considered each other to be equals and accepted each other for who they were. True friends were loyal, trusting enough to

share confidences with each other, sharing resources, or were even ready to die for the other.<sup>1</sup>

Although the Bible does not share in such discussions, at times it portrays some of the ideals of the Greco-Roman treatments. In the New Testament, the clearest reflection occurred when Jesus called His disciples His “friends” (John 15:15) and spoke of His readiness to lay down His life for them (v. 13), urging them to love each other with the same sacrificial love (v. 12). Paul rarely used the language of friendship, but he often reflected its ideals in his epistles. This is particularly true of Philippians.

## **Marks of Paul’s Friendship**

*Loving*—Central to Paul’s relationship with the Philippians was love. In no other of his epistles did he express his love for a congregation more than

in this one (Phil. 1:7-8; 4:1). He showed his love by fully accepting the Philippians. He did not “pull rank” on them by appealing to his being their apostle. He did not use his authority when reproofing them. Instead, he spoke of their mutual sharing (*koinonia*) in the gospel (1:5). He spoke with them of his situation in prison and how he faced possible death (vv. 20-25). He requested their prayers for himself (v. 19). All of this reflected a deep affection, a mutual acceptance, and a genuine friendship between them.

Later in the letter Paul presented two models of friendship. The first was Timothy. Timothy shared with Paul a genuine concern for the Philippians, a concern that surpassed that for his own affairs (2:19-24). The second model was Epaphroditus. Probably a Philippian himself, he had brought Paul a gift from the Philippi church. In so doing, Epaphroditus had become sick. Paul knew they had heard of his illness, so he was eager for them to learn of his recovery (2:25-30). Paul probably sent the Philippian letter to them through Epaphroditus. The entire incident illustrated the strong bonds between the Philippian

congregation, Epaphroditus, and Paul.

*Self-Sacrificing*—Writing to the Philippians, Paul referred to the possibility of his dying (1:20-26; 2:17). In pondering the possibility of his death, Paul indicated that ultimately he preferred death, for that meant being with Christ (1:23). On the other hand, his remaining alive would better serve the Philippians (v. 24). In this instance Paul’s friendship would be enhanced not by dying for them but by living in continued service to them. In Philippians, however, the perfect example of someone dying for His friends is Jesus’ death on the cross (2:8).

*Like-minded*—Paul gave particular attention in the Philippian letter to the need for greater unity within the congregation. Early in the letter he urged his recipients to “stand ... in one spirit” and to be “in one accord” as they struggled for the faith of the gospel (1:27). He returned to the same issue toward the end of the letter when he singled out two prominent women in the congregation, asking them to come to an agreement in the Lord (4:2-3). His fullest treatment of the issue was in chapter 2, where he urged the Philippians to think alike, love alike, have

a single mind-set, abandon all self-centered ambition, and consider others as being more important than themselves (2:2-3). Paul urged the Philippians to look after the needs of their fellow Christians before even considering their own (v. 4). Paul turned to Christ as the supreme example of this sort of self-denial—by means of His death on the cross (vv. 5-11). That was the single-minded, self-sacrificial love that they were to follow.

*Correctable*—Paul did not condemn the Philippians for their lack of unity. Instead, he corrected them by appealing to the example of Christ (2:5). Good friends do not shrink from correcting each other, and a good friend does not resent or refuse such correction.

*Comforting*—Good friends take seriously one another's troubles and oppositions. The Philippians were facing opposition, and as their friend, Paul attempted to comfort them by reminding them of the ultimate assurance that God had given them through their faith in Jesus (1:28).

*Thankful*—Paul wrote to the Philippians in large part to thank them for their recent gift. It occupies much of the letter. Paul described it as a “partnership” (*koinonia*) in the gospel (1:5). In two places he mentioned Epaphroditus, who had brought

him their gift (2:25-30; 4:18). Paul concluded the letter with a major treatment of the gift (4:10-20). It filled him with joy (v. 10). They did well by their sharing with him in his time of trouble (v. 14). He reminded the Philippian believers how they had often supported him in his missionary work even as other churches had failed to do so (vv. 15-16). In the Greco-Roman friendship discussion, sharing one another's goods was a hallmark of true friendship. It was surely a key to the strong bond Paul felt with the Philippians. It expressed more than their friendship with Paul, however. As he expressed it himself, it was not so much a gift to him. Much more, it “abounded to their account” (v. 17, writer's translation), because it was a sharing in the gospel.

The ultimate bond in Christian friendship is not only one we have with one another, but our bond with our Friend, Christ, and our sharing in His gospel. The key for true Christian friends is our mutual friendship both with and through Christ.

1. Craig S. Keener, “Friendship” in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 382-84.

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# COMING **NEXT QUARTER**

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## **EZEKIEL; DANIEL**

*Session 1*    **Commissioned** • Ezekiel 3:8-21

*Session 2*    **Saves** • Ezekiel 11:2-4,14-21

*Session 3*    **Judges** • Ezekiel 20:1-14

*Session 4*    **Sought** • Matthew 2:1-12

*Session 5*    **Warns** • Ezekiel 28:11-19,25-26

*Session 6*    **Offers** • Ezekiel 37:1-14

*Session 7*    **Values** • Ezekiel 16:20-21; 23:36-39; Psalm 139:13-16

*Session 8*    **Integrity Established** • Daniel 1:8-21

*Session 9*    **Demonstrate Allegiance** • Daniel 3:14-26

*Session 10*    **Humility Required** • Daniel 4:28-37

*Session 11*    **Trust Exhibited** • Daniel 6:10-24

*Session 12*    **Future Seen** • Daniel 7:1-14

*Session 13*    **Confession Made** • Daniel 9:4-19



# The Second Missionary Journey of Paul



"The Second Missionary Journey of Paul" is adapted from the Holman Bible Atlas (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2014), 244. Used by permission.

## **PHILIPPIANS; COLOSSIANS; PHILEMON**

Paul’s Letters to Philippi, Colossae, and Philemon call believers today to keep Christ central. The original audiences were troubled by conflict—disunity and a false teaching that undermined the centrality and sufficiency of Christ. The apostle’s concern for unity and doctrinal integrity in the churches at Philippi and Colossae provides a model for our own churches. His concern over the relationship between Onesimus and Philemon provides insights into the nature of Christian relationships and how we are to relate to one another as members of Christ’s body. Each of these letters encourages us toward a deeper relationship with Christ that nurtures deeper relationships with others. More importantly, they provide God’s perspective on what it means to live out the gospel in a meaningful way every day.

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